

# Being Sikh, Being Women

Sharanpal Kaur Ruprai

Being Sikh, Being Women:  
Negotiating Religion and Gender  
in South Asian Women's Cultural Productions

Sharanpal Kaur Ruprai

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### Abstract

This dissertation addresses the relationship between gender and religion in Canada, specifically focusing on the Sikh woman. Using a multidisciplinary approach to examine cultural productions such as film, literature, drama and images from the World Wide Web, the dissertation concludes that the Sikh woman is emerging as a controversial new religious figure. I suggest that what materializes are figures of Sikh women who struggle with navigating and negotiating their own reinterpretations of religious symbols. I look at two poetry collections, *Dharma Rasa* and *Valley Sutra* by Kuldip Gill; a film, *Heaven on Earth*, by Deepa Mehta; a play, *Behzti (Dishonour)* by playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti; a novel, *Everything Was Good-Bye* by Gurjinder Basran; a memoir, *On the Outside Looking Indian: How My Second Childhood Changed My Life* by Rupinder Gill; and images of Sikh women wearing turbans from the blogosphere and newspapers. Each of the above cultural and literary productions concentrates on Sikh women's experiences and how they change, modify and/or maintain their religious identity, but the question remains as to how their voices, bodies and images have been transmitted within the diasporas.

Keywords: Sikhism, Gender, Diasporas, Turbans, South Asian, Canadian Literature

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## Introduction

### *Sikh-Cred: Wearing Religion, Wearing Gender*

“Listen,” said Maneck, “why don’t you remove your kara and hide it for the time being?”

“It won’t come off.” He [the taxi driver] held up his wrist and pulled hard at the iron bangle. “I was planning to have it cut. But I have to find a reliable Lohar, one who won’t tell the wrong people.” . . .

The driver smiled. “Solid as a handcuff. I am manacled to my religion — a happy prisoner.” (Mistry 676)

Beginning a study of Sikh Women’s religious identities by quoting Rohinton Mistry’s “Epilogue: 1984” from his 1997 novel *A Fine Balance* may appear odd, but it is an ideal example of how religious symbols operate within narratives. The taxi driver explains to Maneck Kohlah, one of the four protagonists of the novel, that he is a Sikh and unable to remove his Kara. Of course, the taxi driver has to explain to Maneck that various riots have broken out and in and across India because of the attack on the Golden Temple and the riots were sparked by the assassination of India’s prime minister by her Sikh bodyguards. Maneck, at this point in the novel, has been living in Dubai and has returned home for his father’s funeral. Maneck relinquishes the Kara and accepts that the taxi driver cannot simply “wear long sleeves” to cover up his Kara because, as the taxi driver explains, he has to stick his arm out to signal his turns or else the police will stop him. In the conclusion of the novel, it becomes clear how an iron bangle or a beard could become identity markers that could get someone killed. The passage encapsulates the constructions of power between the taxi driver and Maneck, that is, a Sikh and a non-Sikh. It also demonstrates the power of ritualization on the body, that is, between the

religious item, the Kara, and the wearer, the taxi driver, and the religious item and the observer/reader, that is Maneck or the police or the reader of the narrative. This passage occurs at the end of the novel in the epilogue and the readers of the novel would have understood the plight of both Maneck and the taxi driver and would have gained some knowledge of Sikhism and Indian religious politics. The Kara provides the taxi driver with credibility as a Sikh, that is, “Sikh-Cred,” and it is this idea, of wearing religion, that is at the core of this dissertation. Over the years, I, a Sikh woman, have shed the Sikh religious symbols; however, the last symbol, the Kara, is still around my right wrist. My religious detaching has stopped for now, and I am compelled to leave this one symbol in place. For non-Sikh people, the Kara is just another bracelet that any person might wear; however, I have found in recent years that the Kara signals to other Sikh people that I am of that faith. For example, when I was attending the South Asian Literature Association conference (SALA) in San Francisco in 2009, I was introduced to the creative writing editor of the *South Asian Review*. He was a Sikh man wearing a turban and immediately recognized my Kara and spoke to me in Punjabi. When I asked him how he knew I was Sikh he said, “Your last name and you’re wearing a Kara, or did you forget?” I assured him that I did not forget. Reflecting on this interchange I was reminded of Mistry’s novel and the passage quoted above; there I was, in another country, surrounded by academics from around the world, and because of my middle and family name, plus the Kara I was wearing, I was recognized as a Sikh woman. On the surface it would seem that these symbols are doing their *job* of categorizing people into religious groups. Yet questions arise: how have these religious symbols changed in meaning and significance for Sikhs in

Canada? What happens when women begin to wear religious items, such as the Sikh turban, that are usually worn by men? What happens when we read Sikh women's religious bodies within cultural and literary productions within the Canadian diaspora? The Sikh woman, I suggest, is not a "happy prisoner" as in the case of the taxi driver in Mistry's novel; rather, she is emerging as an enigmatic figure.

In this dissertation, I look at two poetry collections, *Dharma Rasa* and *Valley Sutra* by Kuldeep Gill; a novel, *Everything Was Good-Bye* by Gurjinder Basran; a memoir *On the Outside Looking Indian: How My Second Childhood Changed My Life* by Rupinder Gill; a film, *Heaven on Earth* by Deepa Mehta; a play, *Behzti (Dishonour)* by playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti; and images of Sikh women wearing turbans from the blogosphere and newspapers. Through cultural and literary representations, in what ways are Sikh women changing, modifying or maintaining Sikh identity within the diasporas? Each of the above cultural and literary productions concentrates on women's experiences and reveals how women are navigating and negotiating their religious identity; what they reveal is an emerging figure of a Sikh woman. I suggest that Sikh women are struggling with reconciling the reinterpretations of religious symbols within our globalized landscape.

In order to engage with Sikh women's texts, we first need to examine Sikh religious history. In Gabriele Dietrich's essay, *Women's Movement and Religion*, she outlines how women have *not* been at the forefront of religious movements due to their position in society and that women have to "grapple with the problem of the use and reinterpretation of religious symbols in general" (Dietrich 509). Dietrich's argument still

holds true. By understanding Sikh religious history and how males have dominated in the formation and preservation of the faith, I suggest that women have been at the margins of Sikhism and they are actively reinterpreting religious symbols and by using literary and cultural productions they are expressing their marginalized position.

### **Sikhism: A Synopsis**

The foundation of the religion centres on ten male Gurus. There are no women who are held at comparable levels of reverence as these male Gurus. I briefly outline and emphasize each of the ten Gurus' contributions to the religion in regards to women. The founder of the Sikh religion was Guru Nanak Dev Ji who was born on April 15, 1469 in Nankana Sahib (in present-day Pakistan), which was formally known as Rai Bhoi Di Talwandi. He was born to Hindu parents — his father was Kalyan Chand and his mother was Tripta Devi — and he had an older sister, Bibi Nanak. Guru Nanak Dev Ji died on September 22, 1539. Guru Nanak participated in the Bhakti tradition; a tradition that believes that a common person can have a connection or passionate relationship with God and that this connection is shown through the singing of poems and hymns or the painting of spiritual images. During Nanak's lifespan, India was experiencing economic, political and social shifts, and Hinduism, with its various cultural and religious factions, was the country's predominant religion. By the sixteenth century, Mughuls had invaded various parts of India and had established their rule over much of the country. Guru Nanak, from an early age, travelled to many parts of India and returned bringing stories and life

lessons to his community. These stories of Guru Nanak are documented in the *janam-sakhis* (birth stories), which were written in Punjabi in the seventeenth century and the early twentieth century (McLeod; Harbans Singh). Many of these stories are retold to Sikh children and outline how Nanak started the seeds of the faith. Honest labour, high moral character and the belief that God is everywhere are a few themes within the stories.

Many scholars have argued that Guru Nanak was a social reformer who was speaking out against the caste system, the status of Indian women and superstition in religion (Cole and Singh Sambhi; McLeod; Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh; Oberoi). The tales in the *janam-sakhis* that are translated into English claim outright that Nanak was in fact a social reformer and someone who desired peace with all religions. In many of the stories, there is a tension between the Muslim and Hindu traditions and Nanak, in turn, would try to create a middle path between Hindu and Islamic practices and traditions. Nanak did not create a comprehensive belief system as there would be nine Gurus that followed him, taking on the leadership of the religion and building its traditions and beliefs. Each successor or Guru was chosen for a different reason. Even though there is some family lineage, each Guru attempted to choose the most moral and loyal person to carry on the faith.

Guru Nanak did not choose any of his sons to be the next Guru; rather, he chose his faithful follower Lehna, who Guru Nanak renamed “Angad,” which means “from my limb.” After Nanak’s death in 1539, Guru Angad (1504–1552) succeeded the leadership as the Second Guru, which lasted until his death in 1552. He created the written language of Sikhism known as *Gurmukhi* (from the mouth of the Guru). He collected the hymns



from Guru Nanak and began the writing and storytelling that would give shape to the religion. It was Guru Angad who would add over sixty collections of hymns to the *Guru Granth Sahib*. When he died, the “Guruship” was conferred on Guru Amar Das (1479–1574), the Third Guru. He was a devout follower of the faith and even though he was seventy-three years of age, he managed to grow the membership of the religion. He created the *langer* or free kitchen, which served vegetarian meals to the congregation or *sangat*. This tradition continues today across the world in many Sikh temples or *Gurdwaras* or doorway to the Guru. The *langer* was and continues to be an important element for the *Gurdwaras* as it provides a space for the congregation to gather and discuss issues within the community. Guru Amar Das advocated for social reforms such as the prohibition of sati (widow burning), the remarriage of widows and monogamy in marriage. He denounced the veiling of women. Although, all the Gurus are pictured wearing turbans or topknots, the Sikhs did not have a physical marker during these early years to represent their religion.

Under the leadership of Ram Das (1534–1581), the Fourth Guru, the village of Amritsar was founded and became the spiritual centre for Sikhism. It was the Fifth Guru, Guru Arjan (1563–1606), who oversaw the construction of the Golden Temple or Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar. He continued to compose hymns and created the first of the *Adi Granth* (original book). The *Adi Granth* would be one of the most important Sikh scriptures and would play a major part in the lives of the Sikh diaspora.<sup>1</sup> Following Guru

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<sup>1</sup> I will use *Adi Granth*, *Guru Granth Sahib* and Sikh Scriptures synonymously. For clarification, the word “Guru” is translated as teacher and the term itself is a confessional statement. The direct translation of Sikh means learner.

Arjan's death, his son, Hargobind (1595–1644) became the successor, taking on leadership as the Sixth Guru (1606–1644). It was under his leadership that the militaristic dimensions of the religion began to take hold: he introduced martial arts and weapons training and established an army that was both spiritual and well trained. Hargobind carried two swords, which he called "Miri" and "Piri"; the former for the temporal world and the latter for spiritual authority. These swords became the earliest symbols of Sikhism and are still used today in pictorial iconography. Hargobind had three wives and the second wife, Mata Nanki, gave birth to Tegh Bahadur, who would become the Ninth Guru. As a young man, Tegh Bahadur fought in battles with his father and became well versed in the Sikh traditions.

The Seventh Guru was Har Rai (1630–1661) who succeeded Guru Hargobind. He was eighteen years of age and kept up the army that Hargobind had created. When he died, Har Krishan (1656–1664) became the next Guru. He was still a child of six at the time, and only ruled for two years before dying of smallpox at the age of eight.

Tegh Bahadur (1621–674) became the Ninth Guru in 1664. He was beheaded in 1675 by King Aurangzeb after refusing to perform miracles and convert to Islam. The popular memory holds that the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708) reinforced the militaristic dimensions of the religion by increasing the army that his father had built. He is also credited with setting the foundations for the Khalsa, which would establish the visible religious identity of Sikhism. The establishment of the order of Khalsa took place in 1699 at the event known as Vaisakhi (also written as Baisakhi). Vaisakhi is the celebration of the new year when Guru Gobind Singh identified the steps that would be

involved in becoming part of the Khalsa. It is debated if 1699 was the point that marked the establishment of the religion. Sikh scholars debate whether or not the formation of the Khalsa by Gobind Singh went against the principles that Guru Nanak had envisioned (Khushwant; Hawley and Mann; Oberoi; Axel; Jakobsh; Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh). Much of this debate is beyond the scope of this dissertation, as I focus my discussion on the gender issues.

Guru Gobind Singh asked the sangat to demonstrate their faith by being initiated into the Khalsa. As the congregation listened to Guru Gobind Singh's call of faith and initiation he drew his sword and asked who would give his life as proof of faith. As the narrative is told, when five men pledged their devotion to the Guru, it is claimed that they were taken behind a sheet and "beheaded" and then made whole again by the Guru. These five men are known as the *panj piare* (five beloved). I do not want to gloss over this event but Sikh scholars, for the most part, agree that it does not matter if the beheading actually happened; rather, what is important is the fact that many of the sangat followed the Guru and that within a popular rendering of the narrative the males have had full control of the faith. My purpose in including this narrative is to address how the male body has been used to promote and maintain Sikhism. The initiation ceremony required the individual to drink *Amrit* (nectar) and it was sprinkled over the body especially the hair and face. The Amrit was prayed over and stirred with a Kirpan (small sword). By drinking the nectar, the individual became "soldier-saints." Second, Guru Gobind Singh required that the men change their surnames to Singh (lion). After the initiation, the men were given the Five Ks which they were required to wear: Kangha (comb), Kirpan

(sword), Kara (steel wrist bangle), Kachera (loose, hand-sewn underwear) and Kesh (uncut hair).<sup>2</sup> Once the men were initiated, they belonged to the Khalsa and were considered to be *amritdhari*. They were also required to follow the Sikh codes of identification by wearing the Five Ks every day.

Jakobsh demonstrates that women did not participate in the initiation. Jakobsh is critical of scholars such as Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh who claim that women were always included in the initiation (Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender* 232-235). According to Jakobsh, the surname 'Kaur' which actually comes from the Rajput 'Kanwar' and means 'prince' emerged during the eighteenth century (*Relocating Gender* 220). The surname was redefined for Sikh women by the Singh Sabha movement in the 1950s. Over the years, the term Kaur has been defined as 'princess' and has become reaffirmed by Sikhs through naming practices. The popular understanding is that women were given the name during the initiation ritual along side the men; however, this is not the case according to Jakobsh.

Guru Gobind Singh made one other contribution to the growth of the Sikhism. Up until this point in time, the teachings of the ten male Gurus were considered the leaders of the Sikh faith. But it was not until Guru Gobind Singh's death that their collective works became the official spiritual teachings. In *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, Sikh scholar Gurinder Singh Mann has provided a detailed discussion of the historical formation of the Sikh scripture:

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<sup>2</sup> When I refer to the Five Ks in this dissertation, it is this list of items to which I am referring. Again, I want to be clear that most Sikh scholars have claimed that the 5 Ks were weapons and had a much longer history and development within the formation of the faith. (Jakobsh, Mann, Oberoi, McLeod)

The Adi Granth consists of approximately 3,000 hymns of carefully recorded authorship. Over 2,400 of these hymns were written by the six Sikh gurus who lived between 1469 and 1675 in the Punjab. The remaining hymns are attributed to fifteen or so bards associated with the sixteenth-century Sikh court in the Punjab and fifteen non-Sikh saint-poets known in Sikh tradition as the Bhagats (literally, “devotees”), who lived between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries in the northern and northwestern regions of the Indian subcontinent. (3)

Mann does not address the role of women or even the gendered language within the scripture. Rather, he traces which Guru wrote which sections and does *not* address contributions by women, if any. The day before he died, Guru Gobind Singh declared that all of the collective writings would be known by the name *Guru Granth Sahib* or *Adi Granth*. The gendered pronoun *Sahib*, a term reserved for Indian men, has persevered within Sikhism as well as the visual identity of the *amritdhari* man. Therefore, the ramifications of the book or “the guru” is gendered and this cannot be ignored. For the Sikhs, India’s Punjab is the homeland and the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, is considered to be the holiest shrine in Sikhism; it is seen as the Sikhs’ spiritual centre. When Guru Gobind Singh performed the first initiation, he decreed that no other living Guru would follow him and that the Sikhs should consider the *Guru Granth Sahib* to be the spiritual book of authority. Gurdwaras within the diaspora contain a copy of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and, as Gurinder Singh Mann explains, the role of the holy text has expanded beyond just reading the scriptures within the diaspora. Mann outlines that within the diaspora the physical *Guru Granth Sahib* is equal to “royal status,” and within

Gurdwaras it is dressed or “robed in silk or expensive brocade and displayed on a canopied throne, in a well-lit setting” (133). Some of Sikh diaspora has interpreted this holy text as a *living Guru* where people feel the need to bless their food and have special rooms devoted to prayer. For example, in the Sikh home I grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, we had a room that held smaller books or *gutkas* that contained parts of the scriptures from the *Adi Granth*. I would cover my head with a *chunni* and serve the *gutkas* and photos of the ten Gurus vegetarian food on plates as a way to bless the food before the rest of the family could eat. My family and I would pray each morning in the prayer room before I went to school. It was explained to me that the *Guru Granth Sahib* was the word of god and we were an extension or a representation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Thus, it was in April of 1699 that a new Sikh “collective identity” was born, as thousands of people gathered to listen to Gobind Singh’s sermon. We cannot know what the Tenth Guru would have done had a woman stepped forward to become one of the five “beloved ones.” What Sikh scholars have agreed on is that it is historically accurate that men stepped forward to fulfill Gobind Singh’s call (W.H. McLeod; Oberoi; Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, Jakobsh). Historically, *amritdhari* men wear a turban, and it is clear that the turban is a Sikh male-oriented fashion. Sikh women did *not* wear turbans; they wore their hair long in braids and covered their heads with *chunnis* or long scarves. As I will show in my research, it is only recently within the popular adherence of the faith that we start to see the image of *amritdhari* women emerging; that is, Sikh women who

are adorned with all the Five Ks, including the turban.<sup>3</sup>

Sikhism has a long-standing male history that cannot be ignored; all of the Ten Gurus are male, the scriptures were written by men between the thirteen and sixteenth centuries in India. Within the formation of this faith, patriarchal attitudes have been successful and have carried over into the diaspora. Now that we have established through this thumbnail sketch of how women have been absent, marginalized and/or ignored from the formation of the faith consistently, we can begin to appreciate and recognize the complexity of searching for Sikh women's identities, voices and images within the Canadian diaspora.

### *Sikhs in Canada*

Sikh people have had a long history and relationship with Canada; the first wave of immigration from India was all male and the first Sikh women to immigrate have gone unrecorded. Kamala Nayar outlines five waves of Sikh immigration in her text *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver*:

- (1) the early arrivals, in the first half of the twentieth century; (2) white-collar professionals, who immigrated in the 1950s; (3) blue-collar laborers, who immigrated during the 1970s; (4) family members who arrived through

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<sup>3</sup> The *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (code of conduct) was created in 1952 by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. For an overview of the code of conduct, see Kamala Nayar, *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver*, and for a more detailed account, see McLeod, *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism* and Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

sponsorship or arranged marriages beginning in 1951 and continuing to the present; and (5) immigrants arriving after Operation Bluestar in 1984 on the basis of being “political refugees. (15–16)

Between 1904 and 1920 very few Indian women were allowed into Canada; only half a dozen Indian women migrated to British Columbia (ibid. 16). Indian men first arrived in Canada at the turn of the twentieth century and settled in British Columbia. Many of these men were soldiers in India and were using their status as British soldiers to move to Canada, a commonwealth country. It was difficult, if not impossible for Indians, who were called “Hindoos,” to bring their families to Canada during this time. Many of the first Indian men worked in the forestry industry as labour in the mills. They earned less than Caucasian workers and their job options were strictly limited. Canadian immigration laws prevented Indian men from bringing their wives and family members to join them in Canada. All Indians were required to have \$200 in Canadian funds upon arrival in Canada, while Chinese men were asked to pay up to \$500. European immigrants were only required to have \$20. These racist policies were created and enforced to keep Canada as a white-settler colonial country. Filmmaker Ali Kazimi shows in his 2004 documentary *Continuous Journey* how the Canadian government forced the Canadian Pacific ships to shut down their direct passenger service between India and Canada and at the same time created the continuous-journey clause. The clause stated that immigrants must come directly from their place of birth; in other words, ships were not allowed a layover en route to Canada. Gurditt Singh, a Sikh business owner, chartered a ship in Hong Kong called the *Komagata Maru* in 1913 and challenged the continuous-journey



clause.<sup>4</sup> The ship arrived in Vancouver's harbour on July 23, 1914 from India via Hong Kong and was forbidden to dock. Over three hundred passengers were not allowed to leave the ship and were given limited amount of food and water. For over two months the ship and its passengers were forced to go back to India. Many of the passengers were Sikhs and there were a couple of women on board; however, as Kazimi narrates in his documentary, these women were not counted. With the ship leaving, the immigration of Sikhs declined and many men returned to India. Many Sikhs benefited from sponsorship policies that brought the second wave of immigration in the 1950s. Indian men demanded that they be allowed to sponsor and bring their families to Canada; much of this demand was based on new immigration policies (Nayar, *The Sikh Diaspora* 15–18). As the Sikh population grew, Sikhs began to migrate away from Vancouver, across the Prairies and into Ontario in pursuit of economic opportunities. With the passing of the multiculturalism policy by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971, many Sikhs came to Canada as machinists or labourers not only from India but also from England.

The growth of Sikhs throughout Canada continues today. In 2001, Statistics Canada reported that "Canadians of South Asian origin are almost equally divided among the Sikh, Hindu and Muslim faith groups. In 2001, 28% of South Asians reported they were Sikh, 28% said they were Hindu, and 22% were Muslim. At the same time, another 16% reported that they were Christian" (Statistics Canada website). Further, in 2006, Statistics Canada focused on the origin of the Canadian people and reported that South

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<sup>4</sup> See Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar*, as well as, *The Punjabis in British Columbia: Location, Labour, First Nations, and Multiculturalism* by Kamala Elizabeth Nayar.

Asians surpassed the Chinese for the largest visible minority group in Canada (both groups were well over one million).

### *Sikh Diaspora and Globalization*

The diaspora has been theorized from various points of departures in relation to geographical locations. Unlike Salman Rushdie's idea of imaginary homelands where diasporic people are connected based on contested homelands, I draw upon James Clifford's and Avtar Brah's framework of the diaspora.<sup>5</sup> In her 1996 influential text, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah thinks through the concept of diaspora by interweaving journeys, which "... means that these multiple journeys may configure into one journey via a *confluence of narratives* as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory" (180). Within this dissertation I have chosen texts that address the "confluence of narratives" that centre on Sikhism and gender and that change the Sikh community from within. Brah encourages us to view diasporic communities as "constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively. . . . They are embarked upon, lived and re-lived through multiple modalities: modalities, for example, of gender, 'race,' class, religion, language and generation" (180). It is in that "everyday materiality" that

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<sup>5</sup> The definition of diaspora is from the Greek "to sow" (*speiro*) and "over" (*dia*), which means "dispersion" or "to be dispersed," and gestures towards notions of "exile" and "people in exile" (Brah 189).

experience is not just simply re-lived but also transformed through the multiple modalities such as gender and religion. In other words, when Sikh women begin to transform religious materiality within their local Sikh diaspora, it transmits or journeys across the globe. My main concern here is that the Sikh diaspora is one that is reconfiguring itself on an ongoing basis. Therefore, I want to look at the Sikh diaspora as a community that has been created on the basis of religious affiliation between diasporic subjects. I am interested in how Sikh women's subjectivity has and is being practised, lived and experienced in the "local" Sikh Canadian diaspora through creative productions, and my secondary focus is on these representations and how they strengthen or possibly solidify what it means to be a Sikh woman.

John Tomlinson defines globalization as a "rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences that characterize modern social life" (*Globalization and Culture* 2). Tomlinson is concerned with how we travel through time and space and how "we now experience this distance in different ways" (4). Ultimately, globalization "alters the context of meaning construction: . . . it affects people's sense of identity, the experience of place and of the self in relation to place [;] . . . it impacts on the shared understandings . . . that have developed around locally situated life" (20). I suggest that reading cultural productions is one way to view how Sikh women are constructing their identities. For Tomlinson, religion is included in his definition of culture, which "refers to all [the] mundane practices that directly contribute to people's ongoing 'life-narratives'" (20). There is fluidity within culture that is "generated by people 'on the move' and in the flows and connections between 'culture'"

(29). Religion is maintained through symbols; these symbols allow people to link back to a particular global location or a known religious narrative and, as Tomlinson reminds us, “religious observance — as repeated familiar local practices — probably served to reinforce people in the security of a local lifeworld, rather than to introduce much sense of a wider world” (40-41). Someone can “belong” to a local religious group and feel secure within that group but yet the symbols of that group are understood on multiple global perspectives. I think of my maternal grandparents who used to watch religious services from the Golden Temple on television. Rather than attending the local Gurdwara, they felt that the service from Amritsar was “true-er” or, rather, coming right from the voice of the Guru. Similarly, in Mehta’s film *Heaven on Earth*, the Sikh Canadian family eats fried chicken in front of the television which is tuned into a religious service from Amritsar. These local people, my grandparents and Mehta’s fictional characters repeat their daily lives in front of the TV set.

To apply Tomlinson’s definition of culture and globalization, these symbols allow for a shared understanding or a link to a “locally situated life,” that is, for example, my religious practice of wearing a Kara. Let me return to my story of being at the conference that I shared in the first few pages of the introduction. When I was at the conference I thought that I would be “unknown” to the people who would be there, an anonymity that would allow me to observe my surroundings undetected. Nevertheless, that was not the case; it was demanded of me to account for my last name and the Kara on my right wrist. The man who identified me as a Sikh understood that religion allows interconnections to take place between people across the globe. The dispersal of the Sikh peoples over the

ensuing centuries has caused some of these religious structures to shift and take different forms and, as Jackie Assayag and C.J. Fuller caution readers, when discussing globalization “the local” and “the global” are “always enmeshed or entangled, not separate and performed” (*Globalizing India* 2). When religion is “enmeshed or entangled” in the local diaspora, then, how do Sikh women establish or tease out their own subject formation? I suggest that women within Sikhism are struggling with reconciling their reinterpretations of religious symbols within the broader framework of the diaspora and globalization. I was unprepared because it never occurred to me that I would be “called” out as a Sikh woman and that I had to explain my reasons for wearing a Kara. The discussion of globalization and religion can lapse into a discussion of fundamentalism as Peter Beyer and Lori Beaman argue that within the scope of globalization, religion has been “comparatively neglected” (1); it has been relegated to the margins and discussed in relation to fundamentalism. Locally, a person can belong to a religious community and is able to pick and choose how active or religious he/she wants to be within that local community. Nevertheless, globally a person can be seen as a fundamentalist or as more religious than they intend. One way to look at this further is to read narratives that address the local religious context and try to understand how they are using religious symbols.

James Clifford offers some useful insights in his chapter on “Diasporas” in his 1997 text *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, he articulates how diasporic experiences are already gendered and how women occupy fraught positions in diasporic communities. Clifford asks: “Do diaspora experiences reinforce or

loosen gender subordination?" (259). Whether the answer is yes, diaspora experiences reinforce gender subordination, or whether the answer is no, they do not reinforce gender subordination, there is an undercurrent of powerlessness for women that is at the centre of both answers. Clifford answers his own question this way:

On the one hand, maintaining connections with homelands, with kinship networks, and with religious and cultural traditions may renew patriarchal structure. On the other, new roles and demands, new political spaces are opened by diaspora interactions. . . . Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful — struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies. . . . At the same time, women in the diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a “home” culture and a tradition — selectively. (259)

As Clifford states in the quote above, women selectively attach themselves to religious and cultural traditions. I feel “attached to” and somewhat empowered by wearing my Kara; the Sikh man at the conference could not have known that it was given to me by my mother and I was wearing it because it reminds me of her and my grandparents.

Clifford’s understanding of women’s “doubly painful” diasporic experience is absolutely correct. To extend Clifford’s questions, what happens when women are empowered but also marginalized by “new roles” that combine both patriarchal and religious structures? These cultural productions that I have chosen for this study answer what it means for generations of women to combine both of these “new roles.” For example, the mother and mothers-in-law in *Everything Was Good-Bye* by Gurjinder Basran, which I take up in

chapter 2, maintain patriarchal structures when raising their daughters and they participate in the patriarchal abuse towards their own daughters and their daughters-in-law. At the same time, these Sikh diasporic daughters are negotiating religious practice on many different levels. Bhar reminds us that for diasporic generations, the

reconfigurations of these social relations[that is gender relations] will not be a matter of direct superimposition of patriarchal forms deriving from the country of emigration over those that obtain in the country to which migration has occurred. Rather, both elements will undergo transformations as they articulate in and through specific policies, institutions and modes of signification. (191)

It is this frame that I use as a starting point and that applies, for example, to the poetry of Kuldip Gill, one of the first generation of Sikhs in Canada. When her poetry is read in relationship to subsequent generations of Sikh women writers, it reveals negotiated cultural and religious practices that are informed by diasporic generational experiences shaped by gender.

### **Chapter Divisions**

In this section, I provide a brief overview for each of the five chapters in this dissertation. Chapter 1, "Emergence of a Sikh Women's Religious Body," lays out the theoretical approach of gender and religion and the Sikh female subject. I draw upon the works of ritual theorist Catherine Bell, poststructuralist feminist Judith Butler, religious feminist scholars Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh and Doris Jakobsh. In chapter 1, I move

between the theory of ritual and the formation of gender and power and use these as starting points for understanding an emerging Sikh female religious body.

Chapter 2, “Reading Transgenerational Sikh Canadian Women’s Narratives,” is broken up into two parts. I begin with introducing Kuldip Gill, a Canadian Sikh woman poet who embraces cultural and religious traditions in her poetry collections *Dharma Rasa* (1999) and *Valley Sutra* (2009). Through her work readers begin to understand the early struggles of Sikh women in Canada. Gill’s collections address Sikh women’s marginalized subject positions, which are the wife, the mother and the girl-child, or the first generation of women, within a dual Canadian and Sikh culture. I embrace the difficulties of Kuldip Gill’s poetry and I read for the ways in which her poetry collections put forward the notion of a transgenerational Sikh Canadian woman memory. By recognizing the difficulties of reading Gill’s text within the historical frame of white settler nationhood, it becomes apparent that South Asian women have been historically silenced within the field of Canadian literature.

In the second part of this chapter I link Gill’s work with first-time novelist Gurjinder Basran, whose novel *Everything Was Good-Bye* suggests that second-generation Sikh women in Canada survive by performing the role of a “good” Sikh daughter. As well, I draw on Rupinder Gill’s memoir *On the Outside Looking Indian: How My Second Childhood Changed My Life* to address the plight of second-generation daughters who struggle to understand what is considered religious practices and what is considered cultural practices within Canada. These women writers are from the Sikh diaspora and they are connecting with their family stories in order to address the larger



concerns within the community. All three writers deal with the lack of religious instruction given to the daughters by their families – specifically their mothers – and the surrounding religious and cultural communities. Without this religious instruction, it becomes a challenge for these daughters to figure out how to negotiate the role of a *good Sikh daughter* if they are to survive within and outside the Sikh diasporic community.

In chapter 3, “A Shattered Sikh Household in Deepa Mehta’s film *Heaven on Earth*,” the figure of the Sikh woman emerges again; however, this image can be viewed on multiple levels. Deepa Mehta, a Canadian filmmaker, inspires the audience to see an empowered Sikh woman in control of her life, as well as women who continue to serve the cultural patriarchy. *Heaven on Earth* was written and directed by Mehta and co-produced by Hamilton Mehta Productions and the National Film Board of Canada. Chand, the main character, is a recent immigrant to Canada who arrives in Brampton to live with the husband of her arranged marriage, Rocky, and his family, which includes his mother and father, his sister and her husband and their two children. The film is about domestic abuse within a Canadian household. Chand is at the mercy of her controlling and abusive husband and his family. Chand’s own family is in India and she has immigrated to Canada by herself. I examine images from the film and assert that these inspired images, that is, the image of a Sikh woman, walking out of the house with passport in hand is an image that has not been presented to us this clearly before. What emerges is the image of a Sikh woman who is strong, capable, knows her worth, and value.

If Mehta presents us with an image of the Canadian Sikh woman, then British playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti presents us with a response by Sikh communities to this empowered Sikh woman. In chapter 4, “Travails of *Izzat (Honour)*: Contemporary Plays by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti,” I explore the intersecting but often conflicting challenges of the South Asian diaspora amid the politics of female empowerment. In 2004, Bhatti’s play *Behzti (Dishonour)* was shut down because roughly four hundred Sikhs, mostly men, stormed the theatre and forced the closure of the production. Bhatti received death threats and has been in hiding ever since. It was her play that inspired me to begin my investigation into Sikh women’s artistic work and community responses. Her work concentrates on how women artists are silenced by both religious as well as local community groups. Her most recent play *Behud (Beyond Belief)* was mounted in 2010 at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry. Its narrative delves into the personal struggles of a Sikh women artist named Tarlochan, who strives to create artistic work within a racist and patriarchal culture. It is this second play that reads like an autobiography of Bhatti’s life during the time of the first production. I suggest that it is within this work that we clearly see the emergence of a Sikh woman figure that is fully aware of the religious and political positions in which she finds herself included.

The migration of Sikhs across the globe has created new ways of understanding oneself as a Sikh woman. In chapter 5, “Turban, Facial Hair, and Cleavage,” I return to the question I posed earlier: what, then, do we make of an *amritdhari* female’s body? In writing this dissertation, many examples of the *amritdhari* female body have surfaced within the media and blogosphere. I suggest, then, that Sikh women in the diaspora are

changing the definition of the *amritdhari* body on two fronts; first, by taking up the male symbols such as the turban and asserting themselves into the discourse of Sikhism and, second, by defying discourse around gender construction. Sikh women are donning the turban in order to assert their place within Sikhism. In this final chapter, then, I focus specifically on two images of Sikh women taken from *The Toronto Star* newspaper as they relate to the only North American ethnographic study, so far, that deals with turbaned Sikh women's identity, *The Guru's Gift* by Cynthia Mahmood and Stacy Brady. The two visual images are of Balpreet Kaur, who wears a turban and has a beard and whose photograph went viral online in 2012, and of Dalveer Kaur, who dons a turban, wears makeup and shows cleavage. In analyzing the relationship between Sikh women and the turban, I suggest that Sikh women in the diaspora are creating a new ritual within the faith — Sikh women donning a turban.

Collectively, the narratives and films that I have selected for this study provide the reader with an awareness that a Sikh woman's consciousness has been and continues to be a complex subject position. These women artists, creative writers and filmmakers have responded to this heightened Sikh consciousness by incorporating religious elements, displaying rituals and symbols within their work in order to address the debates surrounding Sikh Canadian identity, as well as incorporating contemporary perspectives on the correlation between religion and gender.

## **Chapter One**

### **Emergence of a Sikh Woman's Religious Body**

Chapter 1 lays out the theoretical approach of gender and religion and the Sikh female subject. I draw upon the works of ritual theorist Catherine Bell, poststructuralist and gender theorist Judith Butler, religious feminist scholars Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh and Doris Jakobsh. My methodological approach in this dissertation is an interdisciplinary one and is largely informed by feminist cultural studies, diasporic and religious studies and considers how cultural productions, such as literature, films and images are engaged in the formation of a Sikh religious female body. An interdisciplinary approach allows us the freedom and invites us to expand what texts are worthy of analysis by having a broad definition of what a text is; it allows a richer and holistic discussion in regards to religion and gender. For example, in the final chapter, I read the turban as a religious text and discuss how when a woman wears turbans it is read very differently than when a Sikh man is wearing a turban. I navigate my research questions using textual analysis, close readings, personal reflections and close viewings of contemporary photographs within newspapers and blogospheres. Throughout this dissertation I have included personal reflections and discussions of these reflections have informed some of my analysis. By blending cultural studies and religious studies, the emphasis is on cultural productions as primary sources for analysis. It is precisely these cultural productions that are available to the public and that require critical reflections by both those inside and outside the community.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I describe the feminist perspectives in Sikh Studies and an overview of the existing scholarship. It is important to understand that within the field of Sikh Studies, there are only a few scholars who raise questions about women within the faith. In the second section I define and elaborate on the theory of female subject formation and draw out the relationship between gender and religion. I use ritual, gender, and feminist theories as starting points for understanding what I observe as an emerging Sikh female religious identity.

### ***Feminist Perspectives in Sikh Studies***

An overview of the existing scholarship on women, gender and religion is mainly preoccupied by Judeo-Christian concerns and more recently women in Islam. In terms of religious symbols and women, the most debated religious symbols are the Islamic hijab (headscarf), which leaves the face uncovered; a burqa, which is a loose garment that can cover the hands and face; or the niqab, which is a burqa that veils the face and leaves a slit for the eyes. The scholarship around these items has been well documented by academics, community leaders, journalists and religious leaders who are both women and men. There are far more academic texts that take up the various debates of the politics of the headscarf, while in contrast, Sikh women's issues around religion have remained fairly obscure. For the most part Sikh women have not been represented in the debates between gender and religion. In the field of Sikh Studies, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, Doris Jakobsh, Eleanor Nesbitt and Kamala Nayar are a few scholars who research

Sikhism and women's contributions to the faith and to the Canadian Sikh diaspora. These scholars provide us with foundational research and, in my mind, are pioneers within the field. They have provided us with a glimpse into Sikh women's history and lives. Sikh Studies, so far, has relied heavily on historical events and the impact of these events upon the Sikh identity and, for the most part, much of the research has been focused on Sikh men. There are few texts that concentrate on the Sikh North American diaspora. For example, in his *The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora,"* Brian Keith Axel positions his work within three historical time periods of the Sikh diaspora: the Sikhs prior to colonial rule, the Sikhs' mobility during and after the colonial period and the Sikhs during the transnational struggle to create a separate state in India called Khalistan.<sup>6</sup> Axel's focus is on the masculinization of the male *amritdhari* body and how it has been produced and maintained within the diaspora (36); he does not articulate how *amritdhari* Sikh women fit into the discourse of the body. In terms of the Sikh male body, Axel infers that the *amritdhari* body has attained a hegemonic quality so extensive that all other ways of being a Sikh are constituted in relation to it — particularly, to put it crudely, through a relation of being not *amritdhari*. In a very specific way, the *amritdhari* Sikh has become the measure of all Sikhs. Indeed, according to the discourses of many *amritdharis* today, people who are not *amritdhari* cannot be considered Sikh even though they claim to be Sikh. (36)

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<sup>6</sup> These various separatist movements have not resulted in a separatist state but nonetheless have come to dominate the discussions around Sikh identity and formation. However, much of this research has been done by Sikh men and religious scholars and thus refers only to Sikh men's identity and formation.

In Axel's discussion, he reminds us how the *amritdhari* male is seen at the centre of the religion and how everything will be in *relation to* him. Even though Sikh women are not included in Axel's argument, I want to investigate the idea of how the *amritdhari* body, which includes the turban, is being held up or considered a necessity for Sikh women as well.

Kamala Elizabeth Nayar, focuses on Sikhs in Canada in her 2005 text *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver: Three Generations amid Tradition, Modernity, and Multiculturalism*. She conducted one hundred interviews from among three generations of Sikhs living in the Lower Mainland. She structures her text around three main topics: family relations, Sikhism or religion, and community honour or *izzat*, which included questions and concerns about cultural preservation. She concludes that

if tensions between the generations are to be eased and if the Sikh community [in Vancouver] is to adapt to the Canadian society, there must be more attention paid to programs that encourage the analytics mode of thinking and creativity, and more effort to deal with cultural issues using more modern approaches. For instance, third-generations Sikhs could benefit from help in striking a balance between the traditional orientation towards the collectivity and the modern value of personal choice, so they can reach their full potential as creative and innovative individuals. (232)

When Nayar asks for more modern approaches to deal with the tensions between generations, the cultural productions, such as films, novels and plays, that I have selected for this study, are those modern approaches. The creative productions address cultural

issues of gender, religion and identity and what appears are the voices and stories of Sikh women.

There are a few women scholars who have who have researched Sikh women's contributions to the faith. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh is one of these scholars. Her text, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent*, text to address the Sikh religious scriptures from a personal and feminist perspective. When I was growing up, it was very rare that I would see a woman reading the *Guru Granth Sahib* as it was done by Sikh men or priests. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh is transparent when discussing how her own feminist thinking started with Western feminism. Carol Christ and Johanna H. Stuckey outline the categories of feminist analysis of religion and they divide feminist approaches to theology into three categories: revisionist, renovationist and rejectionist. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh falls under the revisionist category. Revisionists argue that correct interpretations of the sacred texts and images will reveal the liberating message at the core of their religious tradition. In other words, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's argument is that within the scripture, beginning with Guru Nanak right through to the Tenth Guru, the core message is that of equalization for men and women. And within this personal, political and spiritual framework, her interpretations have been fundamental to understanding the context of Sikhism from a feminist perspective and she demands that within Sikh Studies we locate the women in Sikhism in order to understand how Sikhism works towards the development of the religion in accordance with religious practices. She asks why scholars have not asked about the women within the lives of the Gurus, and she would like to unearth these women, or as she terms them, the "mothers" of Sikhism,



played important roles in the formation of the religion. She examines and offers an alternative feminist reading of Sikh scriptures and centres the Sikh woman as a subject within the text. She includes the wife of Guru Gobind Singh in the religious narrative framework. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh claims that “on Baisakhi 1699, he [Guru Gobind Singh] and Mataji become parents of their newly born Khalsa” (*The Feminine Principle* 25). She frames her text around the birthing of the Khalsa as a way to include and reclaim how some women, such as Mata Gujari (the Guru’s mother), Mata Jitoji and Mata Sundari (the Guru’s first and second wives), contributed to the Khalsa (52). She spends a great deal of time on the figure of the woman as “mother” and, while women are celebrated within the scriptures as mothers and wives. Her work is vital in opening up the discussion of how women were included and excluded in the scripture. My critique of this type of rereading is that it celebrates and maintains patriarchal family structures and does not replace the lived realities of women during that historical time period. Even if Sikhism shifted to a more feminist translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, I suggest that the plight of Sikh women would not be adequately addressed or accounted for within the diaspora.

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh revisits parts of the scripture and translates feminine aspects of the hymns; she examines how the use of the word *mother, bride and daughter* are used within the sacred literature. She concludes that “Sikh literature — sacred and secular — has at its center the feminine. Feminine phenomena, feminine tone, feminine terminology, feminine imagery, and feminine consciousness form the heart and muscle of it” (151). She reads marginalized women’s positions and argues that within the

scriptures, the Gurus supported women's liberation, not overtly but covertly within their texts. Regardless of the Gurus' positioning of women, they controlled the text, the environment and the male-dominated religious symbols that have had a lasting effect within the faith. Sikh women have not been at the forefront of religious reforms, nor have they created their own religious texts, partly because of arguments similar to Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh that suggest since Sikh scripture commemorates women, it is a feminist text. Women cannot simply read Sikh scripture and be empowered or feel included in Sikh diaporic society.

In her second book, *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity*, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh continues her revision of the faith by using the image of birthing and mothering in the formation of the Khalsa. She maintains these feminist aspects within the scriptures of the Ten Gurus whose intentions were not based on gender construction but rather on gender mutuality and self-respect (101). As I explained earlier in the introduction, the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, decreed that no other living Guru would follow him and that the Sikhs should consider the *Guru Granth Sahib* to be the spiritual book of authority. She advocates for a “re-memory” of Guru Gobind Singh's emancipatory event,” thereby revealing the bias of her argument; first, she views the Khalsa as a “genderless” event and thinks that both men and women should participate in the “spirit of Baisakhi” (191) and, second, she equates the Khalsa with Sikhism. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh argues that the “Khalsa is the birth of a subject dominated by none — neither by tyrannical ruler, nor by a father, husband, uncle, or brother” (192). The Khalsa was and still is male dominated. Further, she writes, “Inspired

with memory of Baisakhi 1699, Sikhs should throw away the repressive patriarchal blinders and earmuffs, and begin to live anew, conducting their daily life and their rites of passage with a renewed spirit inherited from their gurus” (192). If all the Sikh Gurus are men and all the women are on the margins of the religion and on the margins of the surrounding cultures, then Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh falls short in addressing how women should or can “throw away the repressive patriarchal blinders” (192). Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh’s argument places Sikh women in a predicament because the scripture itself was written and amalgamated over centuries by male Gurus, during a time period when women were not included in the formation of the faith. Historically, women within the Sikh faith have been on the margins and ignored, and their visual identity has been predicated on the male *amritdhari* body. Sikh women are expected to transmit a religious identity and participate in upholding the status quo for Sikh men.

One of the first texts to challenge Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh’s approach is Doris Jakobsh’s *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity* (2003). Jakobsh argues that Sikh history has been impacted not only by religious men but also by colonialism. Jakobsh’s analysis of the Singh Sabha movement in India reveals that the gender politics was based on the British Victorian concept of gender which was patriarchal. She argues that a hyper-masculine concept of Sikhism is prevalent in Sikh history. Her scholarly work is vital to understanding how the Singh Sabha initiatives have been at the forefront of “injecting new definitions and applications to previously indistinct cultural practices, particularly as they pertained to Sikh womenfolk” (*Relocating Gender* 232).

Jakobsh edited *Sikhism and Women: History, Texts, and Experience*, the first academic collection of articles to focus on Sikh women. Doris Jakobsh and Eleanor Nesbitt wrote the introduction together and write: "This field of study is new and scholarship on Sikh women is in its infancy" (25). These women are establishing and initiating new research and scholarship on Sikhism. When W.H. McLeod famously asked, *Who is a Sikh?* it was a starting point for many academics to begin the critical work of analyzing Sikhism. When Jakobsh and Nesbitt ask, "To what extent can we speak of 'Sikh women'? How can one study, learn about, understand 'Sikh women'?" (24), I pause because, as a Sikh woman who grew up in a Canadian Sikh household, I feel a tug of resistance, that is, "being Sikh" on one side and "being a woman" on the other. The interconnection between the two is lived within my own body and both shapes and is shaped by my personal environment. Jakobsh and Nesbitt cast a wide net in terms of disciplines for their collection, but as they pointed out, the scholarship on Sikh women is still new and they have not yet addressed the representations of Sikh women in contemporary and popular literature. Jakobsh and Nesbitt have provided Sikh Studies with a highly useful collection of articles and the wealth of topics indicated the need for ongoing research within the field. It is with Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, Jakobsh, Nesbitt, Nayar that has expanded my own thinking and I am indebted for these scholars and their ongoing commitment to Sikh women's issues. Despite excellent work on Sikh subjectivity, many of the feminist scholars have yet to fully explore how Sikh women's identities are represented within Canadian cultural and literary productions. Without such

an understanding, we are left with an inadequate account of how Sikh women have negotiated religious and cultural practices.

### ***The Sikh Woman's Religious Body***

Catherine Bell's theories of religious rituals explain that the "social body internalises the principles of the environment being generated" (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* 305). In other words, when Sikh men fight for their right to wear turbans in the RCMP or when riding a motorcycle, the "environment being generated" is that the body of a Sikh requires a turban.<sup>7</sup> Some Sikh women internalize or view these principles as the way to access power and assert their own religious identity. In Bell's section "Ritual and Power" in her influential text *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, she outlines how "ritualization is first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations" (197). If we take the social organization to be Sikhism, then we need to tease out where power relationships are located within this religious framework. As I stated in the introduction, Sikh men have been the key organizers and producers of Sikhism and have controlled the way in which women have participated within the faith. When we look for Sikh women during the first wave of immigration only to discover that their stories and lives were not included, we

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<sup>7</sup> In 1995 the Federal Court of Appeal in Canada upheld the RCMP policy allowing Sikh officers to wear turbans as part of their uniform. Both British Columbia and Manitoba have allowed Sikhs to ride a motorcycle without a helmet; however, in 2008 the Ontario Court of Justice took the opposite position. Within Canada, the legal documents reference Sikh men as wearing turbans (Barnett), and Sikh men themselves have taken up their own legal battles and debates for wearing a turban or the Kirpan within Canadian law and courts. Canadian Sikh women, for the most part, have been at the margins of the debates, partly because they have not been as visible within the community.

begin to sense the uneven power relationship between the genders. Bell explains that the social body constructs the experience:

Specific relations of domination and subordination are generated and orchestrated by the participants themselves simply by participating. Within the intricacies of this objectification and embodiment lies the ability of ritualization to create social bodies in the image of relationships of power, social bodies that *are* these very relationships of power. If it is at all accurate to say that ritualization controls — by modeling, defining, molding, and so on — it is this type of control that must be understood. (207)

In order to understand the idea of ritualization of control, let me provide you with a personal example. Recently, I was participating in the Gurdwara serving food when I was told by one of the men also serving that I should be in the kitchen making rotis, not out in the langar hall serving people. When I looked up, I realized that all the women were in the kitchen rolling out rotis and all the men were serving the food. Now, this may seem like a little detail, however, it is an example of how participants, like me, are seen as upsetting the ritualization of power and control. The man who was “policing” me was defining what it meant for me to be a participating member as a Sikh woman. The women in the kitchen were modelling the ritualization of control by staying in the kitchen.

Another example I can apply is from the novel *Everything Was Good-Bye* by Gurjinder Basran (I will take this up further in the second part of chapter 2). Meena questions why she, her sisters and her mother have to participate in the Sunday grief ritual. As unmarried daughters, they have to participate in order for the Sikh community to

maintain control *over them*. Meena may ask “Why?” in her mind, but she follows through with the grief ritual anyway. Her sister Harjinder is the more rebellious one and shows her disagreement by spitting in the glasses of water being served to the guests (12). Bell explains that with “construction of power . . . the people who are constituted by ritualization also empower those who may at first appear to be controlled by them” (207). Again, let me explain via a personal example. When I consented to participate at the Gurdwara, I was consenting to “the order” of the hall, but at the same time I was resisting having to be in the kitchen with the other women. As Bell explains,

‘Resistance’ similarly constitutes relationships of power in defining participants themselves. A participants pressured to attend a political ritual in a totalitarian state might assert that her physical presence is consenting to what is going on, but her mind is resisting. Such participation creates the relations and the very hold of power with her person in terms of consenting physical body experienced as distinct from a resisting mind. (208)

In my example, my participation was negotiated by attending the Gurdwara, by serving food in the hall and by resisting being in the kitchen. The “social molding” was not lost on me, and as Bell clarifies, it is not simply “false consciousness” for there are many times that women have to participate within the hegemonic order in order to resist that order (209–210). When Meena’s sister Harj brought the tray into the living room “after she’d spat into each glass” (12), the consciousness or resistance is implied in the vile action. The spitting or the serving of food in the hall was a way to resist while at the same time being the *good Sikh daughter*.

To further explain this point, I draw on Saba Mahmood's theoretical text *Politics of Piety* in which she does an excellent reading of Butler's gender and performativity. Mahmood's research focuses on women's Islamist cultural politics in the mosques of Cairo, Egypt. She applies Butler's performative theory of drag queens that destabilize the normative gender construction in order to make clear her own theorizing of mosque participants. Mahmood explains:

What is significant here is that as the drag queen becomes more successful in her approximation of heterosexual norms of femininity, the challenge her performance poses to the stability of these norms also increases. The excellence of her performance, in other words, exposes the vulnerability of heterosexual norms and puts their naturalized stability at risk. For the mosque participants, on the other hand, excellence at piety does not put the structure that governs its normativity at risk but rather consolidates it (164).

When I continued severing food at the Gurdwara, I thought I was being *good* but I was disciplined for serving food because I, along with the other women in the kitchen, was still participating in and *consolidating* the Gurdwara space, a communal space for the Sikh diaspora. The Gurdwara is a fraught location for women within the various texts that I examine. In Gill's poetry, she and the other women fall asleep and seem disinterested in the religious service. In Rupinder Gill's memoir, her mother does not take them to the Gurdwara because she views it as a negative space where the community will gossip about her family and her daughters. The most vivid and violent portrayal of the Gurdwara that I examine is in the play *Behzti (Dishonour)* by playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti,



where the Gurdwara is controlled by Sikh men and the women have two choices, either to submit to the men's sexual desires or leave the Gurdwara entirely. If they leave and choose to come back, they are threatened with violence and rape.

Bell and Mahmood are constructing parallel arguments. Bell explains how the repeated ritual continues to dominate even though participants may be individually resisting. Mahmood explains that by being *good at* pious behaviour, participants will always consolidate the structure of the religious institution. Both theorists move in slightly comparable directions from this point on. Mahmood points out that the participants in the mosque are much more engaged in ritual and religious services. However, as outside observers, we cannot "assume that women who inhabit this conjoined matrix are motivated by the desire to subvert or resist terms that secure male domination" (175). Bell concludes, "Ritualization can, however, take arbitrary or necessary common interests and ground them in an understanding of the hegemonic order; it can empower agents in limited and highly negotiated ways" (222). What are these negotiated formations for Sikh women? In Judith Butler's 1997 text *The Psychic Life of Power*, she asks a key question, "If power works not merely to dominate or oppress existing subjects, but also forms subjects, what is this formation?" (18). I suggest that for some Sikh women the "formation of power" has included rituals and, according to Bell, rituals are "strategic arenas for the embodiment of power relations" (206). In other words, when Sikh women wear the Five Ks and the turban, they serve to legitimize the present order while, at the same time, provide a forum in which that order is constantly being questioned and renegotiated by both genders. Therefore, the visual

images of Balpreet Kaur and Dalveer Kaur, the two women that I address in the final chapter, serve two purposes: one is to assert their *formation of power* by wearing a turban as well as letting their body hair grow, as in the case of Balpreet Kaur, and wearing a turban as well as wearing makeup and showing cleavage; and the second is to allow women's bodies to become the site that questions and traverses religious gendered relations. By wearing turbans, Sikh women are announcing and performing their religious identity, but at the same time, they are interrupting and unsettling notions of the turban as masculine, thereby complicating simple, essentialist or binary notions of appropriate gender and religious performance.

Drawing on Bell, Mahmood and Butler, I suggest that the image of Sikh women is being expressed and there is now emerging an new ideal of a Sikh woman. In each of the cultural productions I have chosen for this study, I look at how this image of a Sikh woman is being created and how it is emerging. I put forth that a new feminization of the female *amritdhari* body is taking place. Many Sikh women are already *amritdhari* women, who have been participating within their local Sikh communities; however, some women are choosing to wear their hair tied up in a turban and wear all the Five Ks. It is this image of a Sikh woman that is being held up to some degree as the way to be seen as a Sikh woman and the way to participate as one. It seems that wearing one symbol is not enough to be recognized as a Sikh woman. Because women have not been recognized as Sikhs, turbaned women are presenting to the Sikh diaspora the fact that there is gender inequality within the faith. Up until now, most women have been participating within the

religion without a turban, myself included, but now there is an emerging female *amritdhari* subject.

When I have reinforced the fact that young diasporic Sikh women are wearing the turban, it has sparked outrage and disbelief. I presented this idea at the South Asian Literary Association Annual conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in December 2009. The audience challenged my various definitions of the turban and I was asked if I thought this was a “phase” for these Sikh women and if it were not just a few Sikh women “doing this.”<sup>8</sup> I was also asked if I thought it was “dangerous” for a Sikh woman to wear the turban. As I attempted to answer these questions, my panelist colleagues argued on my behalf and pointed out that, even if just one woman had started wearing the turban, it was necessary to examine because that one woman had changed the landscape and had created a ripple in the religious pond. It was then, in that moment, that I was struck by the thought that, for many within the faith and those outsiders looking in, Sikhism in general continues to be seen as a male-dominated religion in which women are still secondary figures. Because the turban continues to be a male symbol, it is difficult to move past this debate. Much of the debate around women donning a turban is around the historical accuracy of Sikh women wearing turbans. Jakobsh researched Sikh

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<sup>8</sup> The paper I presented was entitled “The Top Knot: Sikh Women Weaving Gender into the Turban” and the panel was entitled “Sikhism and Religious Signification and Demarcation.” The panelists were Gitanjali Kaur Singh, from California State University-Long Beach, who presented “Sikh Women: Markers of Insurgency”; and Rajender Kaur, from William Paterson University, who presented “Marking History, Tracing Diasporic Sikh Subnationalism and Subjectivity in Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*”

women's identity formation on the World Wide Web and concluded that images of women wearing turbans have been recklessly used and express false information about the history of Sikh women who do wear turbans. Jakobsh explains:

These carefully constructed images are not *only* available within the online context, yet clearly, the boundlessness of the internet is an accelerated catalyst in the active construction of Sikh identity taking place. In the process, the image of the turbaned Sikh woman, for instance, despite the fact that it incontrovertibly does not mirror the realities of Sikh women worldwide, is cast instead as normative. (*Sikhism and Women* 14–15)

Women are donning turbans as one way to participate, be visible and counted. It is true that the history of Sikh women wearing turbans has not been accurately portrayed on various websites. Whether Sikh identity should be tied up with the turban is a question that is implicit here. As I have discussed, the turban does play an important role in Sikhism and it is difficult to untangle the two (no pun intended). The image of Sikh women wearing a turban is easily available in both electronic and print media and the debate is complex. For example, consider a young Sikh woman wearing the turban within a Sikh community that is situated in Canada. In doing so, she becomes a visual reminder of patriarchy as well as she becomes the symbol that can be celebrated by feminism because she does not bow to beauty standards, and Sikh religious communities celebrate her because she is adopting what used to be a male religious identity. At the same time that she reinforces and supports a masculine image of the faith, she is also resisting that

image. A Sikh man wearing a turban is not celebrated in the same manner; thus, a woman declares her identity under the guise of choice.

This study is a personal, political and feminist engagement, and it investigates how artists construct Sikh women's subjectivity in their texts. In the next chapter, I examine the absence of Sikh women's stories and voices within Canadian literature and link this absence to the idea of the Gurdwara as a fraught location for Sikh women. As discussed above, in a Gurdwara, there is very little instruction regarding religion but strict cultural instruction on how to behave that is given to the daughters within the diaspora. In chapter 3, I discuss a film that looks at how Sikhs are living in Canada, how they participate in the Gurdwara and how Sikh women's position is not taken seriously within the Sikh households and community. In the last chapter I share images of Sikh women who are creating and maintaining a female *amritdhari* body. Examining artistic productions that use Sikh religious traditions is one way to evaluate and re-think religious identities. By doing so it shifts the debate into other fields of study and urges us to think critically about the modalities of culture, identity and religion.

## Chapter Two

### Reading Transgenerational Sikh Canadian Women's Narratives

#### Part One: Sikh Women Canadian History through Poetry

*. . . I came, willing to act  
like a Punjabi-Sikh village daughter.  
As well as I could. But what must I do  
to belong in this place, here and now? Perhaps,  
grow out my hair, wear a salwar/kamiz,  
laugh less loud, change my work. Dress and adornment  
count — learn the ways — stay at home,  
cook, and become a malan and all of that?*

*And what about that Kanada side? We came.  
Crossed the kala pani, the men  
brought their singhainis.  
If they raise their children there,  
who will inherit the India jameen?  
Is Kanada a homeland, the children's des?*

— Kuldip Gill, "Homelands — India, 1972," *Dharma Rasa*

I open this chapter with Kuldip Gill's poem "Homelands — India, 1972" from her first collection of poetry, *Dharma Rasa*. In this particular stanza, Gill questions how the location of two homelands, India and Kanada (Canada), has contributed to gender construction and cultural traditions. The word choice is imperative here. Gill understands that in order for the narrator to be included in the family she has to be "willing to act / as a Punjabi-Sikh village daughter," which causes an inner conflict for the daughter. The daughter has tried "As well as [she] could" to "act" according to her location, but she cannot simply "change her walk" to become part of the Indian village. We read about this

duality that is embodied within her — or rather — within a “Punjabi-Sikh Canadian daughter” identity.

Kuldip Gill articulates a narrative that connects women’s bodies to their historical and religious memories. These aspects of Sikh women’s bodies and memories have been silenced within Canadian English literature as well as within Sikh religious and cultural traditions. Sikh women are at the margins of their religion and culture and there is no doubt that they participated in the building of the Canadian Sikh community, but the question remains as to how their voices, bodies and images have been transmitted. When I read Gill’s work, I am, in a small way learning and expanding my own knowledge about my own background. Postcolonial theorist Arun Mukherjee believes that “all learning must start with learning about one’s own background, it must not stop there but go on to include one’s fellow beings in enlarging concentric circles, beginning with communities that comprise the Canadian nation state and on to the rest of the world” (*Oppositional* xv). If the “concentric circles” are to happen in our learning, we must have a broad historical and religious understanding of the texts that incorporate South Asian religions and culture within Canada and these texts must become integral components of the Canadian literary experience.

In this chapter, I start with introducing a Canadian Sikh woman poet, Kuldip Gill, who embraces cultural and religious traditions in her poetry collections *Dharma Rasa* (1999) and *Valley Sutra* (2009). Through her work we begin to understand the early struggles of Sikh women in Canada. Gill’s collections address Sikh women’s marginalized subject positions, which are the wife, the mother and the girl-child, and the

first generation of Indian or Sikh women in Canada. I embrace the difficulties of Kuldip Gill's poetry and I read for the ways in which her poetry collections put forward the notion of a transgenerational Sikh Canadian women memory. By recognizing the difficulties of reading Gill's text within the historical frame of white settler nationhood, what becomes apparent is how South Asian women have been historically silenced within the field of Canadian literature and within their communities.

### **Introducing: Poet Kuldip Gill**

Kuldip Gill was born in 1934 in Punjab, India, in the Faridkot District. Gill immigrated to Canada when she was five years old with her mother, Bhagwant Kaur Gill, and her brother, Kalvan; they boarded the passenger ship *The Empress of Japan* and arrived in Vancouver in 1939. Her father, Indar Singh Gill, was already working in the lumber mills and she was raised in the Fraser Valley where she worked in the forestry and mining industries for twenty years. She received her undergraduate and graduate degree in social anthropology from the University of British Columbia and completed a Master of Fine Arts. Her master's thesis, entitled "A Canadian Sikh Wedding as a Cultural Performance," was one of the first detailed ethnographies of Sikh women's lives in B.C. Gill was a trained anthropologist, but she was also a Canadian Punjabi Sikh woman ("A Canadian Sikh" 6) who was well aware that Sikh women "have been depicted as almost perpetually subordinate, their roles underplayed" ("A Canadian Sikh" 6). She writes about Abbotsford and the Sikh community there. The Sikh community in Abbotsford is a foundational Sikh



community and its temple is considered to be the oldest Sikh religious institution in Canada. In July of 2002, Guru Sikh Gurdwara was declared a Canadian National Historic Site and, in 2008, it celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the Guru Sikh Temple. The website (<http://www.canadiansikhheritage.ca/en/>) includes some of Gill's family photos and contributions to the community. There are childhood photographs of Gill on this site but nothing else is listed about her. For example, there are no references to her books of poetry, not even to her poems that depict life in Abbotsford. Sikh women's voices are still being silenced. Even though many of them are second- and third-generation Canadians living in Canada and contributing to the overall community, they are not yet recognized as pioneers and leaders.

I first met Kuldip Gill in 2000 when she was on tour with her first book *Dharma Rasa*, which won the British Columbia Book Award the following year. I was late to her appearance at a local bookstore and, when I arrived, Gill was already reading from her poem "Homelands — India, 1972." When she read the line, *And what about that Kanada side?* I felt moved and connected; her voice has never left me. *Dharma Rasa* was the first poetry collection in Canada that I read that included the images of Sikh communities from a Sikh woman's point of view. Kuldip Gill passed away in May 2009 in Abbotsford at the age of seventy-five. It was her death that made me reconsider the value of her contributions to Canadian literature. There is very little analysis of Gill's work in the wide range of academic texts within the field of Canadian literature, and very few

reviews. Her works, like those of other pioneering South Asian Canadian women, address the historical gaps in Canadian literature.<sup>9</sup>

*Dharma Rasa* is structured into two parts: part one is inspired by “Rasa theory,” which is “part of Indian genre theory and Sanskritic poetics, describes an elaborate typology of nine basic emotions, each of which can be identified as the reigning tone of a work” (*Dharma Rasa* 106). The nine emotions are eros, sorrow, wonder, fury, the gruesome, the heroic, the timorous, serenity and the comic. Part two, “Kuldip Ke Divan: Ghazals,” is a series of five Ghazals. In the following close reading, I will focus on part one in which Gill writes narrative poetry that weaves in her own family stories and focuses on her mother and women in her community.

When she published her first collection of poetry, Gill was aware that her primary audience for English-language poetry would be non-Sikh or non-Punjabi readers.

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<sup>9</sup> The subject position of “South Asian Canadian writer” is a label and a categorization within Canada literature. In *A Meeting of Streams*, writer and literary critic M.G. Vassanji wrote that the term *South Asian*

includes, besides those who come to North America immediately from the countries of South Asia, the “East Indians” of the Caribbean and the “Asians” of East and South Africa. Obviously, then, it does not represent a single strand, a single outlook or concern in political, cultural, or literary matters. Each of the several South Asian groups comes with greatly differing immediate experiences. *South Asian* is then perhaps a term best used as one of *contrast* ... In Canada, South Asians are easily identifiable by their features, hence the commonly used appellation “East Indian,” irrespective of the country of origin. (4)

The definition of “South Asian” Canadian literature has a historical definition, I turned to Arun Mukherjee’s *Postcolonialism: My Living*, which is a collection of critical autobiographical essays of her academic learning, teaching and relationship with Canadian literature. Mukherjee states that “South Asian Canadian identity has emerged” (39), however, “the fact remains that South Asians are a people divided along class, caste, religious, ideological and national lines” therefore, “to suggest, then, that our writers speak in one voice, the voice of ‘resistance,’ or represent the ‘collective,’ is to distort the facts” (40). However, *South Asian* is still being used to highlight one body of work that is not part of mainstream Canadian literature.

Therefore, she provided the reader with a detailed glossary (101–105) and “Notes on the Text” (106–107). Gill recognized that the reader would need to understand the title of the collection in order to appreciate her overall structure. She explains that she uses the term *Dharma*

in the religious sense of the word, as the inalterable duty of a thing or being, and as the intellectual and moral motives found in human conduct. In this book the name has special meaning since the immigrant experience encloses us within the circle of dharma, which is nothing if not the epitome of transformation through the eons. (106)

Gill’s skill at writing and explaining her terms is a powerful example of the skill South Asian Canadian women writers have had to develop because they have needed to explain terms and include glossaries in order for their readers to fully engage with their work. In reading Gill’s “Notes on the Text,” we learn a short history of her family’s travels between India and Canada. In providing her readers with her family history, she highlights how women in India lived and how moving to Canada was a difficult and lonely life for her mother and herself:

Many of these poems were inspired by stories told by my parents and by other family members. Some were written after reading letters that my father had written to my mother in India, which she carried back to Canada.

In 1913 when my grandfather came to Canada, there were few Sikh families in B.C. He brought his youngest son (my father) and four of his nephews

to Canada. In 1939 my mother, brother and I came to Canada to join my father and grandfather. Within two years of arriving in Queensborough, my family moved to Mission, where we were the first Sikh family in the town. My mother spoke no English. She came from a culture where women of the same clan lived together in large families, all generations under one roof. Here, we were alone. A few Sikh men also lived in Mission, and one family lived on a farm near Deroche. Few Sikhs today know what it was like to live in Canada in the early years of immigration and through World War II. Some of these poems are our stories written as poetry. (106–107)

Gill introduces herself as a Punjabi Sikh who was born in India, she links her religious identity that is Sikh with her national identities of Indian and Canadian. Her family moved to Canada when she was a child in 1939. Therefore, her poems addressed the immigrant memory of coming to Canada from India and also a memory of her mother and the surrounding women's community. In the section titled, "Adbhuta Rasa: Wonder," Gill is inspired by her mother in the poem "Travelling Through the Borderlands." She writes:

Immigration officials wouldn't let us go  
aboard the CPR Empress Line.  
Quarantined, a whole  
long month in Hong Kong.

With sty-burned eyes I held  
my mother's hand tightly,  
looked and  
listened, as sound burned.

We stayed in the Hong Kong Sikh temple.

In the morning, a policeman standing on a pedestal whistled  
at rickshaws, cars, cycles, people.

I watched two men, twins, joined at the chest  
roll along the ground, each pushing  
over the other with the momentum of thin arms.  
Between them a coin box rattled up and down.

My mother led me up steps  
flanked by carved granite lions.  
Inside a glass box I saw a coiled  
snake's shed skin.

I wore new shinning red clogs  
with nailed-on black patent leather tops  
that clipped and clopped along cement sidewalks,  
elevated in the rain.

Everywhere things hung on lines with strings:  
pork grizzled chickens, heaped gizzards, glazed everything,  
fish pineapples, small red bananas, peeled tangerines,  
all smelling of each other.

I wonder my mother survived without English,  
illiterate twenty-three, carrying an infant boy,  
a four-and-a-half year old girl  
across oceans, month-long quarantines, continents,  
head taxes, third-class holds, immigration rules.

She bought a granite grinding-pestle to make masala,  
two saris, a cut-velvet jacket and dress, and for her neck,  
a hammered gold gingeeri to take to Vancouver. (32-33)

When she writes that her mother “survived without English,” it is a reminder of how Sikh women came to Canada with very little education in English during this time period.

These women would have spoken Punjabi and possibly Hindi, but as Gill explains in her notes, her mother “came from a culture where women of the same clan lived together in large families, all generations under one roof. Here, we were alone” (106–107). These

women would have had to survive regardless of their religion or cultural background. In the third stanza in the first line, “We stayed in the Hong Kong Sikh temple,” I read for what is not within the poem. In this poem, the mother is able to at least tap into a communal space based on religion within Hong Kong. Gill makes a point to ask or rather wonder how her mother “survived without English,” but the mother in this poem would have spoken some Punjabi. Within this poem the “Hong Kong Sikh temple” is possibly “flanked by carved granite lions.” The mother is able to buy items without having to speak English as indicated in the last stanza. The mother is doing her best to survive and when we turn the page to the next poem, “Trans-Pacific Ships: The Empress of Japan,” we read how the mother and the four-year-old are on the ship and are in the “third-class hold” (34) on their way to Canada. We read the mothers’ frustrations: “Though she cursed him, still / fed her son and daughter, crying” (34), the daughter is focused on eating “Strawberry jello / ... Ruby-red shimmering jewel-block” (34). Gill has provided us with a memory of what it was like to travel, by ship, in the early twentieth century. These stories and details give us a window into the lives of these women. Feminist scholar Enakshi Dua (1999) categorizes women of colour writers within three waves. In the “first wave, 1850–1970,” women of colour’s literature and contributions were somewhat forgotten and unrecorded. I would place the context of Gill’s poetry within this first wave. When I read Gill’s poetry she fills in the gap and reminds us that women of colour have had to struggle for equality within racialized societies and women have had to locate themselves “in a particular history — the history of a post-colonial, white settler

formation” (Dua 10). In these poems, I read how Gill is locating herself, her mother and other women of colour within this history through memory and re-memory.

Gill focuses on her parents and the sacrifices that her parents and other Sikh families made in order to become part of the nation. We read of this sacrifice in both of her poetry collections. The history of young Indian men arriving on the shores of Canada has been documented in various narrations. For example, Sadhu Singh Dhami’s coming of age narrative of a young Sikh man named Maluka (which is the title of the text) is loosely based on Dhami’s life story. The text is part memoir and part historical fiction and one of the earliest literary accounts to address issues of the Sikh diaspora from a male perspective. Dhami was born in Pipanwala in 1906 and travelled to Canada at the age of sixteen in 1922, and he frames the novel around this time period. Dhami went on to earn a doctorate in educational psychology from the University of Toronto in 1937.<sup>10</sup> We rarely hear the voices of early Indian immigrants and with Dhami’s narrative we are given a window into what life was like for these men. Within the first pages of the narrative, Maluka describes his life working among the Indian lumbermen in British Columbia where there were no women: “For the first time in his life, Maluka lived in a small world of men without women. It was a strange experience, disturbing at first and

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<sup>10</sup> In the introduction it states, “Punjab-based scholars at the University of Alberta, Edmonton and Sadhu Binning of *Vancouver Sath* tried to get it published in Canada” (n.p.). The version of the novel that I obtained was not published in Canada but by the Punjabi University in Patiala, India. The first print run was funded by the Punjabi Art Association in Edmonton, Canada. I think it is important to remember the publishing history of this novel because the story itself is set in Canada and describes the life of a young Sikh man during the first wave of Sikh men immigrating to Canada. The fact that it was not published in Canada points to the struggle of writers and artists of colour to be included in Canadian literature.

embarrassing at times, but he soon got accustomed to it" (17). There is an absence of Indian women in Canada during this time period. Much like the author, Maluka was the first young Indian man to learn to read and write and becomes the scribe for the rest of the men, who encourage Maluka to study. When reading Gill's poetry with its heavy focus on the world of women, alongside *Maluka*, with its focus on a male life story, we can more fully appreciate Gill's telling of how women inhabited the world of men while within Dhami's novel there is a lack of women's voices. In her poetry, Gill attempts to bring Sikh women's voices into being. The novel addresses how the historical moments in Canada have shaped the young man and the Sikh diaspora in Canada. By omitting Indian women from the narrative, Dhami marginalizes and silences them. When the Indian men in the lumber mill demand that Maluka write their story, Maluka does so but fails to include women in the narrative. Dhami's text affirms that Sikh women have been silenced and invisible within Canadian history and literature and within the Sikh community.

The portrait of Sikh men's struggle during this historical period is gaining interest and there is a renewed resurgence of academic writing on the subject, as on the Komagata Maru, for example. However, the question must be asked, where are the women within this historical period? South Asian feminist Vijay Agnew demands that it is essential to include ethnic groups in our Canadian history in order to establish a critical framework for feminist theory in Canada, or else women's voices will remain invisible (34-35). When we read novels such as *Maluka*, we are reading historical memories that do not address how women were treated in Canada. For these narratives we must turn to South



Asian women's poetry published in the 1980s and onward. Poetry has become a feminist narrative style that has been well documented in South Asian women's writing across Canada. In the 1970s and 1980s a field of South Asian Canadian writing in English was in full development and South Asian Canadian writers such as Uma Parameswaran, Himani Bannerji and Surjeet Kalsey, to name a few, were publishing their works. Punjabi Canadian poet Surjeet Kalsey has explored the particular plight of immigrant women in her poems "Breaking the Silence" and "An Eclipse." Kalsey does not use overtly Sikh religious or cultural symbols in her poems; however, she was the first woman to present poetry written in Punjabi and in English to Canadian audiences in the seventies.<sup>11</sup> Kalsey insists that women have "already started to / rewrite those pages of history" (9). Gill's poetry describes Sikh women's positions as well as Sikh men within a Canadian landscape during this historical time period.

In a close reading of Gill's poetry in *Dharma Rasa*, what is revealed is a love between a Sikh man and his wife back home in India. In section one, "Sringara Rasa: Eros," the first poem is entitled "Love Letters—Canada to India, 1930s," in which Gill conceives of a Sikh man who has already moved to Canada and misses his wife dearly:

Can I live this love, matching you to poetry  
in Urdu, Gurmukhi and Hindi,  
and have as reply only your few unlettered  
lines telling me that our children are well,

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<sup>11</sup> She has been successful in publishing four books of poetry in English, *Speaking to the Winds* (1982), *Foot Prints of Silence* (1988), *Sandscape* (1999) and *Colour of My Heart* (2011). Her poems are written in English and are rich with reclaiming and freeing women's bodies and voices. In *Foot Prints of Silence*, Kalsey's poems are centred in a women's voices and breaks away from traditions of silence.

relating my mother's love and brother's wife's whine?

I wait. No Letters. Not even paper-love rewards.

Chained to pulling green lumber all night, dragged

through black sleepless nights, thoughts of

your long green eyes, your face, blaze my mind.

My children's voices cry/laugh through my dreams.

Enfeebled by endless greenchain shifts, I fear

a way, the years. (*Dharma Rasa* 13)

The poem requires the reader to know the history of Canada and immigration policy.

Indian men were the first to arrive in Canada in 1906 and settled in British Columbia.

Many of these men were soldiers in India and were using their status as retired soldiers to move to Canada, a commonwealth country. The father in the poem who is waiting for a response to his letters works in the lumber mill, which is where most Indian men found work when they first arrived. It was very difficult, if not impossible, for Sikhs to bring their families to Canada. To earn enough money, to achieve this took years, as they were paid very little and there were limited job options for them. Within Canadian literature, there have been a few texts that address their plight within Canada. Gill's poetry exposes a portrait of the pioneer Sikh man who misses his wife and children while he is living in Canada and working in the lumber yard. In the poem, "Samaran," the Sikh man writes to his wife a "love-letter" in code. He cannot simply write an open love poem to his wife because the letters are, as Gill reminds us, "read first by his mother, / sister, brother, someone who could / read them fast, get the message, get the tone" (23). His family is

reading the letter quickly in order ascertain if he and the other family members are in good health. Within the same poem, Gill describes how the wife is the last to receive and read her husband's letters:

She read them last, slowly,  
Eking out each sound,  
e-a-c-h-v-o-w-e-l  
To hear his voice,  
to remember how he strung his words,  
breaths and sighs, long sounds  
and breaks. She melted words, riddled  
meaning, for her, alone.

She read them like this  
on rose-pink sleepless mornings  
before the house woke,  
at the peacock's first shriekings;  
she read them in moonlight haze,  
on starlit nights, as sheet lightning  
filled the skies. (*Dharma Rasa* 23 )

In this second stanza we see how the bride or the wife is the last person to read these letters. Her private moments are read out to the entire family. Even in letters, these women had no private moments for themselves. For any privacy, the bride has to read her husband's letters "before the house woke" and then again "in moonlight haze." Indian women did not have a space of their own to read and they did not have a space of their own to compose a letter in response. When the husband writes, "I wait. No Letters. Not even paper-love rewards" in the poem, we are reminded that these women might have been illiterate and could not have written in Punjabi or English. In these few lines of poetry, we learn how these South Asian women pioneers had to struggle in order to adjust

to Canadian life. In the last stanza she explains how she kept the love letters safe *in her trunk* and these letters were the only letters to travel back and forth from Canada to India and back to Canada:

She folded and unfolded,  
Reading the works of a lovesick Canadian husband.  
Eventually she tied them into packets,  
Placed them locked in boxes  
in her trunk. Brought them back to him  
with children's sweaters, seeds, and chooran and saffron,  
the books he ordered, the surma for her green eyes,  
their phulkari and their bagh. (*Dharma Rasa* 23-24)

The only way that these young women came to Canada was either as brides or as very young children, as in the case of Gill's family. Gill is honouring not only her parents' lives but also the lives of other pioneer Sikh men and women. By inscribing the couple's love for each other in this poem, she creates a portrait of the earlier Indian settlers in Canada that includes women.

In *Valley Sutra*, her second book of poetry, Gill continues writing these portraits of the earlier non-white settlers. This collection of poetry was published after she died in May 2009. In the note from the publisher, Vici Johnstone explains that Marisa Alps and Kate Braid edited the collection posthumously because Gill passed away one month after she agreed to publish the collection with the press. We cannot know if this collection was laid out the way Gill would have arranged the collection. Unlike her first collection of poetry, the second collection is loosely structured; there are two sections of the text, "The Mill Town" and "Bill Miner's Notebook." The latter section is a creative non-fiction poetry piece in which Gill focused on Miner's time in Mission and his attempted train robberies of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) trains. She has "liberally added

fictional characters, events and places” (95) to the overall narrative of Bill Miner’s life story.<sup>12</sup> The two parts of the *Valley Sutra* are very different in concept and structure, but for my purposes I focus on part one, “The Mill Town” in which Gill intensely describes the life in Mission and the local history of Punjabi/Sikh families. She includes a Notes section in which she explains that she was inspired by “the concept of *lieu de mémoire*, that is ideas about place, the sites, and the realms of history, to talk about memorial heritage of my family and people during a particular time” (93).

In the poems there are glimpse into what life must have been like for Sikhs, both men and women, during the early 1920s. Gill describes how Indian men worked the mill. In the “Mill Yard Sounds,” Gill uses the image of a turban: “hemlock, fir, cedar sawdust rose cumulus and turbaned/ around heads of mill-men, the forklift driving in and backing out” (15). We know that many of the workers were men from India. And the indication of this heritage is from the description of the food they eat, Gill writes in the last line: “They sat on the lumber with tin lunch buckets / open, eating curries, achars and rotis in the sun” (15). In contrast, in the next poem, “The Mill Where the Men Worked (1920s),” we learn that one of these men was related to Gill, either her father, brother or uncle, but we do not get a clear family lineage:

I want to know where you sat  
after you pulled green lumber all day.  
The mill across the bay, the smell  
of sawdust, and pitch from cedar, fir, hemlock  
and spruce mingled with sweat in your clothes.

I’m here. Are you a shape in the trees,

---

<sup>12</sup> Bill Miner, also known as the “Gentelman Bandit” was born in Kentucky in 1847 and died in Georgia in September 1913. He is known as Canada’s first train robber in Canada.

hovering omnipotence or watching spirit,  
a tenth insight group?

I want a sign from you.  
Would you have chosen this spot?  
Does an aesthetic run in the blood?

Rain and mist, yet  
the sun beams through cloud onto a flat jade rock.  
It says: here I am, your table.

The picnic hamper in my hands,  
Full: grapes, mango, cheddar  
and brie cheese, bread. (*Valley Sutra* 16-17)

As Gill was a small child during this time period she is imagining how Sikh men lived and worked in Youbou. This second collection of poetry is rich with images of working Sikh men and how women had to work alongside them. For example, Gill worked in a cannery during her teen years, and in the poem, "Seventeen — Summer Job at Aylmer's Cannery," she describes how she worked a shift alongside the men: the "fun shift was the sugar shift in the attic where we lolled/over sugar bags stacked by hundreds, talking/"(24). When her teammate "Rob" looked to her for help, he called her "*Sam, Sam, the fixit ma'am*" (25) because she was able to fix the pulley. Gill reminds the readers that young women, just like her, worked as hard as Indian men did to create a life in Canada. She does not shy away from explaining her position of being a woman. Unlike other writers, she recognizes the importance of the complex relationship that both sexes had with living and working in Canada. In another poem, simply titled, "Brothers," she transposes images of India onto the Fraser River:

The Fraser is our Ganga.  
He stands by the river, beyond the mill

hands in pockets, everyday  
 without tiring of it. Scans water, sky, the pahari—  
 Mount Baker — rising from the east horizon.  
 The bank, wild weeping willow brushing the water  
 Under cottonwood trees, oat grasses.  
 How can we leave its side, your brother and I?  
 This river, its mills, log booms, beehive  
 burners, log hauls and saws, boom boats,  
 peaverys, boom men sawyers, sawdust. (*Valley Sutra* 45)

Here the men are helping to build Canada through these lumberyards and mills. There is a longing and a loss between the end of the first and second stanza when Gill writes: “wild weeping willow” the landscape is crying with the brother and sister standing on the shore. Gill does not let the reader forget that these Sikh men and women have aided in building Canada and that Canada has become a home for this family. In the last two stanzas of this poem, Gill again describes the flow of the river to remind the readers that this family is connected to another “desh/pardesh” and that we are connected through these rivers and waters:

Away from India the Fraser is our Ganga  
 at Haney, Hammond, Matsqui,  
 Mission, Millside, Port Coquitlam, Pitt Meadows, Port Moody,  
 New Westminster Mallardville, Mitchell Island,  
 Steveston, Lulu Island, Richmond.  
 Whole lives in these waters. These. Our previous lives  
 float down, encircle the cosmos  
 join the waters of desh/pardesh. Again.

We have lived by this river every day  
 of our lives, Kuldip. Our whole lives,  
 by this flowing river. Our whole lives  
 flowing — by this river. (*Valley Sutra* 45-46)

The repeated image of the Fraser and the Ganga as one river is something that runs

throughout the two poetry collections. When Gill imagines Indian women's lives back in India, she captures the longing, the pain of distance and their marginal positions within their households. These poems are artifacts of Sikh lives in Canada and in India. For example, consider the gaze of the young wife and the desire of the husband in the poem "My Eyes Hurt When You're Not Here (*A husband in Canada to his nineteen-year-old wife in India*)" (15), in which the husband's voice is the "I":

I walk alone from the mill, covered with hemlock,  
cedar sawdust, pitch, slivers in my skin.

Are these the stars I saw reflected in your eyes every night  
as you lay beside me on the charpi outside?

Do your sahelis tease your sorrowful eyes as they sing  
Ghazals, bolian, love songs at weddings?

Do the flowers of the chameli spread like a carpet in the  
bagh remembering we walked whispering dusky words?

This jindgi I offer to you, the saw dust, cedar and hemlock—  
hair shirt my anger/longing for you subsides.

Your absence walks in the memories I left,  
Preceding my steps.

A ghostly figure in the fog. (*Dharma Rasa* 15)



In *Dharma Rasa*, Gill writes a very different picture of Sikh marriages and of the inner lives of Sikhs than I have read in other narratives that I take up in the second part of this chapter. The tone of the poems in part one is saturated with love and sexual desire. The relationship is not blurred with stereotypes of aggressive Sikh men and passive Sikh women. The haunting figure of the wife coming through the fog is how women were “seen” by men. Gill writes a sensual aspect into the relationships. The last three poems in this section — “The Dream Train,” “Love Song” and Kildeer’s Dance” — are sexually explicit. In the “The Dream Train,” Gill blends the voice of the husband and wife and their sexual encounter before the husband leaves on the train to head back to Canada. The sexual encounter is coded in a dream sequence in which the wife objectifies the husband’s body: “your full-muscled body gleaming, / hair curled around your head” (17). The husband desires Shakti or rather his wife, “My body sings the memory of heat, the cool room, your water-and-oil wet body, clinging black hair” (17). Hair is the sensual part of the body for both husband and wife, and the reader has to read between the lines to capture the sexual longing between these lovers. In the next poem, “Love Song,” the husband is seen as an Indian nightingale:

Bring the bulbul’s song,  
 His eyes black like silk.  
 Let his heart throb under my ear.  
 As a coverlet for my breast  
 let him unknot his ebon hair.  
 Then my sighs of cardamom, cloves  
 and honeyed cinnamon  
 will wisp under his tongue,

lick his mouth and full-lipped sounds. (*Dharma Rasa* 18)

Gill manages to show us, through these poems the sexual lust and longing between these lovers. It is through love that Gill manages to unearth these connections.

Women have had to face living with their in-laws and being separated from their family and husbands. Gill captures this anxiety in her poem “Oud Ja Kalya Kauva (Fly Away Back Crow)” that transports the reader to India where the wife “winnows the grain, tossing the chaff aloft to the skies” (14). Gill locates the wife’s position in the second stanza and we read how exposed the wife feels:

Remembering the husband-emigrant  
the Kala(black) Kama (god of love)  
gone too long, and she, enmeshed  
in thick webs of a clan’s familial life,  
in bondage to a mother-in-law,  
in purdah from lecherous red-eyed men,  
is her own children’s slave. (*Dharma Rasa* 14)

In the glossary, Gill defines the word purdah as “veiling practiced by women; an avoidance behaviour” (104); it is how these young brides attempt to protect themselves from the “lecherous red-eyed men.” Gill highlights the vulnerability of women who have been left behind in India. While her husband is away in Canada, the wife does not have any freedom because the “thick webs of a clan’s familial life/.” The ties to the in-law family and the mother-in-law is inscribed in this poem and, within the overall narrative,

Gill captures the first moments of a diaspora's identity that begins in the "home" nation.

Consider Gill's last stanza of this poem:

Envious of the women who carry  
 food to husbands in the field,  
 she watches the tassels of corn whirl  
 where couples are seduced by shade. (*Dharma Rasa* 14)

The wife cannot carry food to her husband or sit in the shade with him; therefore, she is left to do the field work as well as take care of the in-law family. It is in this poem that we begin to see how Indian women have had to adapt to life without their husbands and, then, when they move to Canada, they have to adapt again to life with their husbands and in a new location. Gill makes it clear that when the Sikh men "Crossed the kala pani" ("Homelands — India, 1972" 61), it launched a new dual identity for the wife back home. The wife in this poem is already feeling the effects of a border crossing even though she has not left India. The women in Gill's work do not simply yield to the demands, but rather, Gill creates a space for the readers to see that these women are not vulnerable victims but smart and courageous. In "Homelands—India, 1972," Gill shows the strength and dignity of women in India:

Remember them, the men? All gone. To Canada.  
 Alone, their women folk still farm these lands or  
 lease out the best. Cull the cattle,  
 sell the old, milk the rest; the children  
 water, walk and watch them. Remember the men?

They languished here in white pajamas.  
 Now, crows nest in their courtyards,  
 their women sleep behind locked doors. (*Dharma Rasa* 61)

Gill highlights the ways in which Indian women have to reshape their subject positions in order to fit into surrounding cultures while at the same time they are under the gaze of the men and their in-laws. Gill foreshadows how their in-law families views these young women as burdens; Sikh daughters are seen as burdens within Basran's novel and in R. Gill's memoir, but it is within Gill's poetry that we are given the first glimpses of how women are coping and dealing with this position.

*Sikh Religious Images in Gill's Poetry*

In the final three sections of *Dharma Rasa*, we see a clearer emergence of a Sikh woman's diasporic identity. Once again I quote Avtar Brah: "... multiple journeys may configure into one journey via a *confluence of narratives* as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory" (180). In Gill's poetry she is writing in *confluence of narratives* based on her own memory as well as the collective historical memory of Sikh women and, by doing so, a diasporic identity is being sketched or outlined for Sikh women. In the seventh part of the collection entitled "Bhayanky Rasa (The Timorous)," there are three poems that focus on Sikh women's lives in Abbotsford. I will do a close reading of each of the three poems and show how Gill weaves in Sikh women's religious marginalization and Sikh women's subject position. These poems are "My Mother's India and Queensborough Kitchens," "The Old Abbotsford Temple: A Child's Queries about the

Pictures,” and “The Old Abbotsford Temple: A Young Woman Reflects on the Bhog.”

In the first poem, “My Mother’s India and Queensborough Kitchens,” the daughter watches her mother from a distance. Gill captures the omnipresent voices of a young girl — a young girl — who is always asking too many questions. This free-verse poem articulates how the young woman’s mother cooked in India and how in Canada she had to learn to cook on a stove, buying one from a Japanese neighbour:

India  
A chula, a tandoor she made herself.  
Molded clay, it fired slow. In her veins, eons  
of knowing how to cook this way. She was sure.

Queensborough  
An iron wood stove with a door,  
a shelf, an oven, and porcelain decoration.  
When the Japanese  
under pressure before internment  
and desperate for cash,  
sold everything on the boardwalk,  
she bought a white enamel stove  
from her Japanese neighbour.

The stove moved to the kitchen  
by the Fraser River site. White enamel polished  
bright as memory, black-edge with  
fear of being transported like the Japanese  
entering her life too,  
like Ito’s

The stove in the kitchen cooked  
Indian rice, coloured saffron  
for my brother’s birthdays.  
Japanese interned  
forgotten. *Aliens*.

Until in walked Helen, red-haired,  
Caring, taught mama everything  
About living here. Mama learned  
from her to bake two-egg white cake,

in wax-paper-lined tins,  
 with peel grated from Ito's  
 Japanese oranges, in  
 butter icing. (*Dharma Rasa* 73)

Gill names the Japanese women and reclaims how women worked together to create a life in Canada. This poem lingers with fear, a fear about “white Canada” sweeping into the kitchens of these women and transporting them to internment camps. Gill writes down these fears for us to remember and to reflect on how women have connected in domestic spaces, like the kitchen. It is the last stanza of this poem that weaves in all of the women. The “until” in the last stanza implies a before, and Helen’s ethnicity is not explicitly revealed, other than through her red hair. The “here” is Canada. The poem is rich with connections between women and Gill captures how the women intervene and support each other. Yet, the relationships between Gill’s mother, Helen, and Ito are complex and there is a hierarchy of who is Canadian and who is not; Gill’s mother is a new immigrant who is having Canadian culture imposed upon her by Helen, even as Helen teaches her to cook in her new home. Ito’s internment causes, Gill’s mother and Gill to fear their own displacement; I read this in the lines, “Japanese interned / forgotten. *Aliens*.” Even though Gill’s mother is not physically displaced, the internment of Ito and her family, teaches a lesson to Gill’s mother and daughter, and the lesson is that they must learn the imposed culture or else they will be “forgotten. *Aliens*.” Gill’s mother benefits from Ito’s internment even as she aids Ito by buying her stove. Gill’s mother memory of Ito is not forgotten; from the second to the last stanza, Gill repeats Japanese. From the “Japanese neighbour” in the second stanza, the stove in the third stanza which

becomes a metaphor for the “Japanese interned” and in the final stanza the “Ito’s /Japanese oranges,” Gill does not allow us, the readers, to forget Ito. In this one poem, Gill has done what Mukherjee demands, that is, “*all learning must start with learning about one’s own background, it must not stop there but go on to include one’s fellow beings*” (*Oppositional* xv). Gill encirclement her “fellow beings” “Ito” and “Helen” and has added her mother’s experience to what it means to be living in Canada. It is within these poems that we read how women’s writing attempts to dismantle the hierarchy of who is “Canadian” through showing the links between women.

When we read the next poem, “The Old Abbotsford Temple: A Child’s Queries about the Pictures,” Gill visually captures the now one-hundred-year-old Guru Sikh Gurdwara in Abbotsford from a first generation girl child’s perspective, skilfully connecting traditions and symbols from the Sikh faith:

A two-storey temple,  
stairs rising from the street sidewalk  
where we stand for the Khalsa photographs,  
four doors — we are casteless,  
we enter from the north, south, east and west.  
Out of carpeted floors a raised dais  
overlaid with sumptuous cloths,  
tapestries of gold, silvers, embroideries: jalis  
to enfold the holy book, the Guru (Granth Sahib). (*Dharma Rasa* 74)

In the above photo we can picture how the Guru (Granth Sahib) is located within the Abbotsford Temple and how for a child the space is magical with “tapestries of gold, silver, embroideries: jalis.” A note about the term jalis appears in the glossary where Gill explains that it is a “special form of open embroidery work” (102). The Sikhs in Abbotsford did start off as casteless and many people built the Gurdwara to reflect this

idea; Gill explains why the Abbotsford Temple has *four doors—we are casteless*.

However, the image of being welcomed into the space is jarred by the second stanza:

Pictures line the walls,  
haunt children and frighten me.  
Did our Gurus walk like this?  
Headless, spouting blood from an open neck,  
he holds the kirpan in one hand and  
his own head in the other. He walks. (74)

The child's queries about the violent pictures are troublesome, not only to the child but also to the reader, because there are more questions than answers. The image is of one of the ten Gurus, but Gill does not explain the picture's background.<sup>13</sup> When the child asks in the third line, "Did our Gurus walk like this?" Gill uses the pronoun "our" to indicate that the child is aware that she is part of this faith and is part of the collective. However, the child does not understand and is never told why "the Guru's walk like this" nor is she given any answers to her questions. From the poem, it could be read that the Guru has cut off his own head and is walking, but again we are left with additional questions. The poem indicates that the Guru is holding a Kirpan, one of the Five Ks, and I am making an assumption that the Kirpan is unsheathed, but her questions are important in the context of bringing the Sikh religion into the centre and making Sikhs accountable for their beliefs. The next stanza is a series of questions:

Do our temples shine like that? The golden domes.  
Is it real gold? Where did it come from? Who climbed up  
there and was it pounded on? Laid on? Poured on?  
And what about that pond? Who swims there?  
Where are the swans? (*Dharma Rasa* 74)

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<sup>13</sup> I suspect the painting is of the Tenth Guru who was beheaded.



When Gill uses the pronoun “our” in the first line, she is again indicating that the child partly understands her position, however, from the first line to the last, none of the questions asked are answered. The picture of the Golden Temple in India is surrounded by water and is structured differently from the Abbotsford temple. From her questions about the picture of the Golden Temple, it can be read that for the Sikh child being raised in Canada, the Golden Temple is somewhat empty of meaning. Here I have to acknowledge how Gill crafts the questions within the poem and does not attempt to answer them; instead, the work is left for us to do. It is the innocence of the questions that compels an answer but Gill is crafting a diaspoic identity, a subject position that starts at an early age. I would like to note here that the child is not participating in the religious hymns, but rather she is looking at pictures within the Abbotsford temple. My point here is that rather than learn about the holy book or take part in the hymns, the child is looking at and questioning the pictures. The child asks:

Who lit the aura around Guru Nanak’s head?  
Will I see that kind of man, white beard, clear-eyed,  
holding a falcon, in India? In our Village?  
In the world? But why then, not here? (74)

The poem speaks directly to the stories I was told as a child about Guru Nanak and how he believed that God was everywhere. When the child asks, “But why then, not here?” the “here” is Canada and the child is asking a key question that addresses the formation of the faith. The girl child is in the process of creating a diasporic identity that is being produced through questions, but we are yet to receive the answers. When she asks “In our Village?” it is the question mark that is read here — in the structure of the poetry collection the girl-child has seen India and understands that she is not to see Canada as

“home” but rather there is a new identity being formed, one that includes the travel back and forth. In the last stanza, Gill cleverly directs the reader back to Canada through history:

Who is that man lying on the railroad tracks,  
the *Komagata Maru* man (martyred?)  
wrapped in a white winding sheet (asleep?).  
The thread of his life, like railroad ties  
across a country, runs yet through us all  
like a dream in the blood. (74)

Gill dovetails religion and racism in Canadian history but yet she manages to tie “us” all together through “a dream in the blood.”

In the third poem of the “Bhayanka Rasa: The Timorous” section, “The Old Abbotsford Temple: A Young Woman Reflects on the Bhog,” the young woman’s voice is describing the Bhog or temple ceremony within the Gurdwara. In this poem, Gill provides us with a narrative that addresses and describes the importance women; she describes how Sikh women’s work is foundational to keeping the community together. The first three verses require that the reader know some of the religious elements such as sitting on the floor and that there is a men’s side and a women’s side. In this descriptive poem, the young woman’s voice explains her surroundings within the first four stanzas:

I hear the granthi, recite the prayer  
read from the Guru Granth Sahib.  
A man gracefully waves a long white-haired whisk;  
impure flies must not touch the holy book.  
The rhythm of his waving arm, a voice reading,  
the reciting crowd, put me to sleep.

I sit on the floor in the midst of women.  
We shift our weight from cheek to cheek,  
lean against the walls; friends lean backs against

our knees; old ladies balance holding our shoulders  
as they pass to sit with family  
or friend in the throng.

Unknown children grasp at shawls,  
fall into strange laps, and turn us black  
and blue when they hit our heads with theirs.  
We smile, suffer the little children.  
As they cry for prasad, mothers shoo them  
across the room to the men's side.

In the langar below, nanis, mothers,  
aunts, mothers-in-law and other women  
boil the chai, knead the dough, roll the rotis,  
stir the rice, egg one another on: take a turn,  
peel the onions, soak the tamarind, wash the  
mint, dice the potatoes, squeeze the lemons.  
The old aunts say,

Don't ask the new daughter-in law,  
Unmarried girls, about to be brides,  
To do this. Oh, sundar ha!

Then, let it all go to our old eyes.  
And they wipe away the sting of spice,  
dry their old aware eyes.  
Women share stories: whisper, tears, agonies  
and laughter. (*Dharma Rasa* 75-77)

Here we read how the *Guru Granth Sahib* becomes the key element of the religion and must be kept "pure" and clean. The impure flies must be kept away, and this tradition of waving a "long white-haired whisk" is something that continues today within Gurdwaras. The women are not included in the religious service; rather, Gill writes how hypnotic the male *granthi*'s (priest) tone is and how it puts her "to sleep." I read that the women are disinterested in the religious ceremony and are passively listening to the male *granthi*

while at the same time they are taking care of the children until the “mothers shoo them across the room to the men’s side.” We could also read that the woman falls asleep because she may have been working in the langar hall below. In the first poem of *Dharma Rasa*, there are only two Sikh women, Gill’s mother and herself. By the time we reach this poem in *Dharma Rasa*, I can read how the community has grown with the “throng” of women in the way that Gill describes the Gurdwara’s space. The separation between men and women is also very telling; this separation forces the young women to learn how to connect with women around her especially in the langar hall. In the fourth stanza she refers to “the langar below” — below, in the Sikh dining hall where the women are cooking to feed the community. I read the old aunts’ saying that they do not want to work with “unmarried girls, about to be brides,” not because they do not want to teach them to cook but rather because “their old aware eyes” know that these young women have a life time of work ahead of them. The older aunts are exercising there agency in protecting the young women from the “sting” of the onions and spices and it can be read metaphorically as protecting them and undermining the patriarchal social order. When these women are cooking with each other they “share stories: whispers, tears, agonies, and laughter” (75–76) and they create a strong connected female community. The segregation of the women in the kitchen keeps them from power and authority on one level, but the segregation allows for the bonding of women, and agency within the female community.

All these family stories were spoken, but not written until now, in Gill’s poetry. These women are connecting with each other in the langer hall rather than passively

sitting and “listening” to the prayers in a space that has become more religious and masculine. As we continue reading, Gill does not let Sikh women “off the hook” for their gossiping. Sikh women’s gossip can become a source of division and lead to power struggles. But through the gossip, Gill is reminding the reader that these women carry with them to Canada notions of honour and pride as well as cultural and religious divisions.

...And the gossips are at it.  
A mother agonizes,

We fought at Independence,  
her aunts barely made it home alive, now  
she thinks it’s all right to marry and even go  
to their side in Pakistan to visit! (*Dharma Rasa* 75–76)

The mother who agonizes is lamenting how her daughter has betrayed the community and is marrying a man from Pakistan. As readers, we infer that the groom must be Muslim.

The sangat (the Sikh congregation) is being led by the male granthi (priest), and again the young woman explains that she does not understand the religious script which would connect to the earlier lines where the young woman was falling asleep:

I can’t understand a word the granthi chants,  
The language is old Gurmukhi mixed with Urdu  
poets, Hindi and maybe even Sanskrit and Pali  
prose. No one explains. Perhaps few even know.  
I say the prayer, Vah Guru, and  
hold two hands out for prasad. (*Dharma Rasa* 76)

The poem suggests that Sikhism or religion has shrunk to a phrase like “Vah Guru” for the young woman and for the entire congregation. The lack of understanding of the

religious script connects to the earlier lines about falling asleep within the Gurdwara. There is a lack of enthusiasm and knowledge about what goes on in the temple that is shown in the lines “No one explains. Perhaps few even know,” certainly the only person that might understand is the Granthi, however, the diasporic community, does not full engage with the religious scriptures. When the young woman reaches out for “prasad,” which is as Gill defines it, “a sanctified food used in blessings” (104), the poem ends and we, as readers, are left with questions rather than answers. Personally, as a child, I would fall asleep because of my own disinterest and, more importantly, lack of knowledge of what was going on in front of me. It is the lack of knowledge that links these poems in this section; from the mother, in the first poem, who had to learn how to live in Canada from the red-haired Helen, to the young child in the second poem who has nothing but questions about the religious pictures, to the young woman in the third poem who is disinterested and cannot stay awake during the religious rituals. When read together, the subject position of the young woman in the third poem appears to be tense, she is kept somewhat away from the kitchen and she does not understand the granthi’s chants or the “old Gurmukhi language,” yet she still is part of this community because it is situated in Abbotsford and she understands that Canada is now “home.”

In the final section of *Dharma Rasa* , “Hasya Rasa: The Comic,” Gill once again weaves in how Sikhs in Canada were told by their community leaders to wear the Five Ks. The poem is listed in the table of contents as two poems but it is one complete poem with two titles and printed on the same page. (I have quoted the poem in full and bolded the titles):

### **Sikh Women's Dress Code — Queensborough, 1941-1947**

A dress? No, salwar /kamiz! Observe the 5K's  
 Code: Kara, Kangi, Kes, a slimmer Kachi, Kirpan.  
 (1" embedded in the kangi will do.)  
 And a slip, no burnt bras, wear them tight.  
 Chuni-covered heads, rakabied feet  
 (called here, high-heeled shoes), and a coat.

Dress Code or be called  
 an alien,  
 a Hindu,  
 just off the boat.

### **Sikh Men's Dress Cod — Queensborough, 1941-1947**

A turban, no way out of it! The granthi said so.  
 Sikh men observed it  
 Code: Kara, Kanga, Kes, Kacha, Kirpan.  
 (1" embedded in the kangi will do.)  
 No pajama/Kurta: in India modern  
 Men wear pants, shirts, shoes and suits.  
 Canadian Sikhs carry a card that says, Alien  
 As the Germans and Italians do.  
 On our streets sirens screech and wail.

A Sikh air raid warden wears the 5K's, a black armband,  
 Sours the streets. Lights out! Lights out!  
 Draw down rolled tar paper blinds.  
 Beware the Japanese bombers!  
 Queensborough safety demands pitch black night.

Dress Code or be known by Sikhs as  
 one who cuts his kes:  
 smokes and drinks and gambles,  
 carries liquor into the temples,  
 chases women.  
 Forgets to send money home,  
 and to write to his mother.  
 Has anything been left out? (*Dharma Rasa* 87)

In this poem, once again women have asked a question, “A dress?” but this time an answer is provided which is an instruction, “No, salwar/kamiz!” As a reader I assume that it is the granthi who is providing the answers for the women as he does for the Sikh men. The instructions are clear, they are to wear all the 5Ks and the only exception for both the men and the women is the small comb described as a “(1" embedded in the kangi will do.).” The “Dress Codes” for the Sikhs symbolize that there is a solid community and create a division between those Sikhs who are pious and those who are not.

Gill uses poetry as a tool to weave Sikh Canadians’ stories into the fabric of Canadian literature, and she places women squarely in the centre of that tapestry. Gill’s poetry captures the voices of Sikh women who have just immigrated to Canada, and it captures the voices of the first generation. In *Dharma Rasa*, her writing touches on the idea of returning to the “homeland,” but that homeland is imaginary and can be many things. It can be India, Canada, the women’s kitchens, the Abbotsford Temple or the Sikh faith. Religion in this section of *Dharma Rasa* is the process of becoming normalized and I read in Gill’s poetry how women have had lack of time, education and religious instruction but yet they have built a nation and have been the foundation of Sikhism through cooking, mothering and maintaining family structures.

Sikh women’s voices and their texts have contributed to the field of Canadian women’s literature and are valuable examples of how Sikh women artists have combined the complexities of a Sikh identity within a Canadian context. In the corpus of Canadian literature, there are a few anthologies that focus on South Asian Canadian women’s



poetry.<sup>14</sup> In her “Poet’s Statement” in *Red Silk*, Gill accounts for what she writes and how she sees herself as a writer:

Throughout, I try to understand our world as I write about the various types of diaspora (traditionalists, assimilationists and intergrationists), exiles and expatriates, the dominant society and its economic, political and social attributes. Issues of “home” and environment (India, where I was born, the Fraser Valley where I was raised, Vancouver where I live, and the places where I have traveled), immigration, and hybridity, all have a fundamental and intended impact on what I write. (43)

In these two sentences Gill explains the complexity of writing for an audience that may not always fully comprehend each element of her poetry. By reaching out and providing notes about her culture and a glossary of Punjabi words, she is aiding the non-Sikh audience as well as creating a dialogue between the first and second generations of Sikh women and beyond. Even though Gill focuses on the lives of Sikh women in her poetry collections, the main focus is on immigration and issues of

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<sup>14</sup> Poetry anthologies began to place South Asian women writers within the context of Canadian literature. The question of genre itself is part of a larger discussion about race and racism in the Canadian publishing establishment. In *Returning the Gaze*, writer and critic Himani Bannerji explains, “that the dominant public voice of non-white women was mainly a creative one” (x), and she argues that this stereotype “as creative writers has actually put us in a double jeopardy. In the first instance, as non-white women, our experiences of ‘difference’ need form and expression. For this reason, creative writings or oral histories are crucial, and make a fundamental demand for change. But this demand calls for a systematic analytical thinking and this is what needs to be elaborated by us [non-white women]. The lack of this elaboration is not due to any absence of intellectual-critical abilities of non-white women; rather, the intellectual and publishing establishment of Canada, including the universities, have put neither time nor money towards creating any spaces to promote or support our writing, especially non-fictional”(xi-xii).

home. Gender, is secondary to these topics because Gill is working within the diasporic movement of what it means to be “home.” However, when I look at the second generation of writers in part two of this chapter, it becomes clear that the second generations of writers are focused on gender and can afford to voice their concerns on issues of gender in a way that Gill could not due to her race and immigration status. The first generations of writers deal with race and not being “white” or Canadian. While the second-generation of writers deal with the gender discrimination within their Sikh home and within Canada.

Gill has made valuable contributions towards filling a gap in Canadian literature. South Asian Canadian women writers have a history of writing and publishing poetry since the early 1980s. In the 1980s and early 1990s the poetry and experiential essays was the genre of choice for many women who struggled to be heard within the Canadian feminist movement. Sociologist Angela Aujla has argued that by writing poetry South Asian women

are remapping themselves by challenging dominant representations of “their kind” through subversive forms of literary production. I would argue that in the tension between imposed identities and those asserted by multigenerational South Asian Canadian women, spaces of resistance have formed in the anthologies and other venues in which they publish, and in the act of writing itself. These venues provide a forum for South Asian Canadian women to creatively express their insights, anger, pain, and reflections. It is a textual space created by and for multigenerational South Asian Canadian women in which their marginalization

and repression is both articulated and resisted. (46)

One of the first anthologies to have published South Asian women writers was *Shakti's Words: An Anthology of South Asian Canadian Women's Poetry*, edited by Judith Kerns and Diane McGifford and published in 1993. These writers in the anthology, *Shakti's Words*, have set the bar high as they have addressed issues such as racism and women, political and cultural aspects of living in Canada, and overall a strong commitment to voicing a feminist agenda (Aujla 2000; Agnew 1996; Bannerji 1999; Mukherjee 1994). In the introduction, the editors emphasize and defend their choice to focus on women's writing: "A collection of women's work allows us to hear both the individual and collective female voice: we hear, too, the varying and variegated qualities of these voices — women's experience, perspectives, use and subversion of language — which recur with intriguing differences" (ix). It was with this anthology that South Asian women's poetry created a cultural opening within Canadian literature. The writers in the collection — Himani Bannerji, Arzina Burney, Lakshmi Gill, Uma Parameswaran, Ramabai Espinet, Yasmin Ladha and Surjeet Kalsey, just to name a few — address their lives within the context of immigrating to Canada. As Angela Aujla explains, "despite the many difference among multigenerational South Asian Canadian women, similar experience can be identified. These include experiences of racism, feelings of being 'other' and not belonging, colonialism, patriarchy, sexism, and living in a diasporic culture" (41). Under the umbrella of South Asian writers, women have been divided many times, by gender, religion and culture; however, some women have maintained the umbrella term in order to unite with various women's communities.

In my trajectory as a scholar, I have been obsessively concerned with narratives from South Asian women, in particular, narratives from women writers who identify as Sikh Canadians. The placement of an identity is always a critical decision. My desire for narratives that blend a nostalgic Sikh home with a lived Canadian home is a desire for how literature can reflect back to the general Canadian reading audiences that Canada is no longer a country where first-year students should read the Bible. I now ask who are the next generation of women writers in Sikh Canadian literature? In the second part of this chapter, I explore the works of Gurinder Basran and Rupinder Gill, two second-generation writers who self-identity as Sikh women. It is clear from reading their works that Sikhism is an important part of life in Canada; however, as I will analyse, their primary focuses are family and women's community cultures.

## **Part Two:**

### **Canadian Sikh Daughters: Coming of Age Narratives**

Gurinder Basran's novel *Everything Was Good-Bye* and Rupinder Gill's memoir *On the Outside Looking Indian: How My Second Childhood Changed My Life* are two coming-of-age narratives about second-generation Sikh women who have grown up in Canada. Whereas religion was integral in the works of the first generation of South Asian women writers — for example, Gill's descriptive poems of the Gurdwara — Sikhism is largely absent in the works and lives of second-generation South Asian women writers. Rather, what we read about is control over daughters and daughters-in-law, isolation and

dependence upon and abuse by family members. When religion collapses into a phase such as “Vah Guru” and girl-children are left with nothing but questions about religion as we have read in Gill’s poetry collections, it suggests that religion has become normalized in the lives of these second-generation women. In Himani Bannerji’s influential text *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism Nationalism and Gender*, she reminds us that “[p]atriarchal social violence is thus daily and spiritually normalized in these walled towns or communities or religious and cultural ghettos” (164). These cultural and religious “ghettos,” to use Bannerji’s terms, are woven together and it is complicated to separated out and women are still being shaped by and are shaping these ghettos.

Both narratives are written in English and are set in Canada. Both authors use their positions as daughters to frame their narratives, and both address the nature of growing up as religious and cultural Sikhs in their Canadian homes, Meena in British Columbia and Rupinder in Ontario. Both authors take a slightly different approach to telling their coming of age tales: one through a fictional story and the other through a comedic memoir. These daughters are not only telling their stories but are also writing their mothers’ stories. I have chosen to discuss these genres together because both weave a stronger interpretation of the daughters’ experiences as well as the mothers’ experiences. In my mind, both genres of writing are equally important.<sup>15</sup> As Gill weaves in her parents and her own stories into her poems, both of these women writers do similar

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<sup>15</sup> I see these genres as subjective as these women are drawing upon their lives in one way or another. My point is that memoir, no less than fiction, is a mediated picture of the history it recounts. It certainly show us glimpse of the past, but we can’t simply assume that it is historical fact.

things. For example, on the dedication page of Rupinder Gill's *On the Outside Looking Indian*, she writes: "For my parents and my siblings, who in letting me tell my story, let me tell theirs too" (n.p.).

Gurjinder Basran's narrative *Everything Was Good-Bye* concentrates on the plight of young Sikh women living in Vancouver who struggle against years of patriarchy, which is often enforced by Sikh mothers or mothers-in-law, as depicted in the film *Heaven on Earth* by Deepa Mehta, which I address in chapter 3, and in the play *Bhezti* by Kaur Bhatti, which I address in chapter 4. Basran's story is set in the suburbs of North Delta outside Vancouver. The protagonist, Meninder or Meena, is one of six daughters who attempt to rebel against her mother's rules and religious and cultural regulations. Nevertheless, the pressure to get married and to follow her mother's rules surrounds her as she attempts to balance her rebellious nature with what is expected of her. If the teenage Meena is rebellious, then the teenage Rupinder Gill in her memoir is obedient. She does not fight with her parents because she already knows the rules and is somewhat content to watch television in the basement. Rupinder Gill's memoir *On the Outside Looking Indian* is framed in a comic mode in order to tell her story about her life growing up in Ontario. I think the title — *On the Outside Looking Indian: How My Second Childhood Changed My Life* — is worth examining. R.Gill's use of the terms Indian, Sikh, Punjabi, South Asian and Brown people are interchangeable and all refer to the idea of race. There is very little critical focus or context around why she has chosen to use these terms interchangeably. The picture on the front of the hardcover book is of Gill as a little girl wearing oversized heart-shaped glasses with red frames. She has light brown

skin and is wearing her long black hair in two braids. In the prologue, she states:

In Indian adolescence you never break free from the rules. You cook, clean, babysit, clean, get good grades, clean, be silent, clean, and don't challenge your parents in any way — especially while cleaning. This was my life. I grew up in a town whiter than snow, about an hour outside of Toronto. Like most children of immigrants, I was raised by the rules of one culture and looked longingly at those living a distinctly different way. (n.p.)

We learn about how she and her sisters spent their childhood cleaning, eating junk food and watching television in the basement. Gill is the oldest of five children (she had three sisters and a brother) and in her story she reflects on how her brother's upbringing was very different from her own. Her brother, the last child after four girls, was given every opportunity to participate and enjoy his childhood. It is not until Gill is in her late twenties that she decides she needs to “re-live” her childhood.

### **Gender Discrimination**

Gill and Basran start their narratives with the fact that they are not boys. In Basran's *Everything Was Good-Bye*, Meena was the last of six girls, and, *On the Outside Looking Indian*, Gill explains that the “birth of a boy in an Indian home could most closely be compared to winning the largest lottery in the world” (14). It was not so when girls were born. Gill recounts how it was when her youngest sister Navjit was born:

There were now four daughters and no sons — the most undesirable of Indian child ratios. Navjit's birth resulted in days of violent tears on the part of my

paternal grandmother, who took equal opportunities to love and hug her and to yell common Indian grandmother phrases at her such as “May you be drowned in cow dung.” (19-20)

On the one hand, the grandmother loves Navjit and, in the same breath, recognizes that Navjit is a girl and a burden to the family. There is very little reflection on these violent gender discourses within the household. But there is remorse that it was a daughter being born. Her living and seeing the difference between how her parents raised and treated her brother and how they raised and treated all the sisters, forces Gill to take the first step towards breaking the cycle of patriarchy, which is to empower herself and to start focusing on herself and her dreams; this is why she decides to write her memoirs at such an early age.

We learn that Gill has a very narrow view of what childhood in North America looks like and, further, that this idea of childhood is rooted in a television version of fantasy. It was a childhood that even “whiter than snow” children could only access if they were either on television or if their parents were financially wealthy. To have access to summer camps, cottages, piano lessons, sleepovers, weekend trips and school trips cost a great deal of money and time. Gill recognizes that her parents did not grow up in Canada and could not see the “value in the things” she and her sisters “were missing out on.” But, she asserts, “what they [her parents] seemed to miss was that they weren’t living in India anymore. They tried desperately to hold on to their culture. For years the only friends they had were fellow Indians. I took the opposite approach” (3). The opposite approach that Gill undertakes is to fit into the childhood she views on television.



However, she realizes that she cannot fit in because her parents cannot afford those luxuries and nor can she. Gill places herself on the outside of her “first” and “second” childhood. Here the notion of “childhood” is rooted in a television fantasy. Gill admits that she and her sisters watched a lot of television in their parent’s basement. Gill has a very specific childhood that she wants to recreate in her life that is based on the television fantasy of childhood. Even though she was living in Canada in a small town, her immigrant parents could not afford all the lessons for her and her sisters, it is only when her brother is born that the parents can afford these lessons because the sisters help to pay for the costs.

All four of the sisters spoil their brother and, as a result, his upbringing shows Gill “first-hand the childhood [she] had wanted for [her] own” (14). Gill’s mother defends her son and really cannot explain why he is given swimming lessons and clothes and allowed to go on school trips — in essence, receiving the love that Gill and her sisters do not receive from their parents. When the sisters point out the difference, their mom says, “Don’t jealous my son!” which really means, “Don’t be jealous of my son!” The sisters are complicit in the “spoiling” of the son. As Gill explains, being older she did not want her brother to “feel the way we had — as if we were less than the other kids” (15). As Navtej K. Purewal argues in *Son Preference: Sex Selection, Gender and Culture in South Asia*, the son is “doted-upon and deified” while the daughter(s) are “unwanted” (47). This feeling of being “less than” is the undercurrent theme running throughout this memoir and through Basran’s novel. Gill’s self-esteem is wrapped up in being a young girl, and Gill is aware of the limitations of her parents’ financial situation. Even though both

parents worked, they could not afford tennis or swimming lessons for all four sisters, but these things did become affordable for the son because by then the son had four other “parents” — his sisters — to pay for lessons and designer clothes (17). Gill attempts to explain her behaviour by stating that she was trying to protect her brother from being bullied for wearing “BiWay” clothes. Although she recognizes the difference between how she was raised and how her brother was raised, she fails to recognize that she was carrying on the patriarchy by putting her brother’s needs and wants first. For example, when Gill was in high school, she had a job and felt it necessary to buy her brother his clothes “where the popular kids shopped” (18). In some way, she is stepping into the role of adoring the male child in the family, providing for him instead of providing for herself.

#### *Survival Tactics*

Gill and her sisters give up their dreams very early on in life. When Gill explains to her sisters that she wants to recreate her childhood by having more fun and fulfilling some childhood dreams, such as taking swimming lessons, visiting Walt Disney World, going to camp and owning a pet (6-8), her youngest sister reminds her about the “social survival tactic of our teenage years” (31), which was to lie to their mother. These young girls learn how to lie not only to their parents but also to their white Canadian friends in order to explain the reasons why they don’t participate in sports or go on class trips. Many of the friends learn to think that Gill and her sisters are not interested in these activities. Gill writes, “When I was growing up, honesty was not the best policy for me” (32). These young girls, as Amita Handa suggests in *Of Silk Saris and Mini-Skirts*, “walk a tightrope of culture.” Handa is a sociologist who concludes that second-generation

South Asian teenage girls living in Toronto use lying as a tool for maintaining an identity. In the chapter “The Hall of Shame” and under the subheading “White Lies, Brown Parents,” Handa writes that she was “struck by how instrumental lying is in maintaining the next-to impossible status of the good South Asian girl” (121). While Gill fits into this image of a “good South Asian girl,” she is also aware that she has to protect her parents’ reputation as well as her own:

I never let on that my parents were strict, because it was so humiliating. I thought there was no way my friends could understand my parents and their overprotection...I wish I could have been more honest as a teenager, but I just wanted to sweep my strict upbringing under the rug. (32)

The lying either to her friends or to her parents indicates a negotiation of expectations, but as Gill has learned, it does not build trustworthy relationships. Handa indicates that many South Asian girls lie because they cannot sustain the arguments with their parents or cannot handle the pressure of telling the truth and, as a result, young Sikh women are never fully accepted by their parents:

While the emotional cost of “living lies” is extremely high for these young women, for many South Asian women honesty is too high a price to pay. It carries the risk of exclusion from the definition of “South Asian.” Walking this tightrope of upholding community identity in a white dominant context brings with it a tremendous amount of emotional stress. Constantly making or hiding parts of the self which are not accepted either by the world of peers or parents has a serious negative effect on self-esteem and self-worth. It is seldom that all the parts of the

self can be celebrated, approved of, and accepted. (127)

Gill's memoir is about the lack of self-esteem and self-worth she felt as a child growing up South Asian, but more importantly, it is about the lingering effects of the lack of self-esteem and self-worth and how this lack affects every aspect of a young woman's life. When Gill asks her parents for their permission to go to New York to live and work, they simply say no. At this point she is in her late twenties, but the struggle to empower herself continues and she eventually picks up and leaves her parents' house, unmarried and jobless, and heads to New York.

### **Lack of Religious Instruction**

These life-stories reveal the confusion and anxiety experienced by this generation living in Canada who are trying to survive and to understand their parents' religion and culture. Both narratives take place in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. They attempt to gain a sense of selfhood by assimilating into Canadian culture and they resist being a victim of patriarchy within Canadian culture as well as within their parents' home culture. These women are mapping out struggles that young Canadian Sikh girls are struggling with — to belong to Canadian communities as well as maintain their “Sikhness,” a “Sikhness” that is intertwined with culture and religious formation. However, I assert that within these narratives very little religious instruction is given to the girl children, which does not match up with the visual cues that the media pick up on. (for example, in chapter 5, I discuss how girl children dressed up for Khasla day and marching in the streets of Toronto).

When this autobiography and this fictional text are read together, they reveal how multigenerational Sikh women lack religious and cultural agency. It is clear from these life-narratives that religious instruction has very little to do with raising Sikh girl children. In both texts, regardless of location within Canada, the girls do not attend nor are they forced to attend a Gurdwara on a regular basis. For example, Gill explains that her parents “expressly declared to us that we were Sikhs. Sure, we went to the Sikh temple — the Gurdwara — when we were kids, but my parents weren’t overly religious. I thought we were there just because that was where weddings were held and where the best aloo muttar sabji was prepared” (22). Gill does not address anything that is overly religious within her memoir. In grade school she wore her “own ethnic costume” (23) for Oktoberfest which her mother had sewn for her — a “traditional Punjabi salwaar-kameez combination. The kameezes were a sunny yellow floral material, accompanied by plain yellow salwaars and scarves” (23). However, when she walks into the classroom she realizes that none of the other students are wearing any of their “ethnic garb”; rather, it occurs to her that her classmates were “third-generation-Canadian white, and thus clothed in their native dress of jeans and T-shirts” (23). In trying to understand her adult life, Gill reflects on the religious aspects of her childhood and realizes that religion and culture are intertwined she cannot simply separate the two.

If Gill’s narrative is void of religious Sikh elements, then in comparison Basran’s narrative allows a window into how these religious elements are or are not adapted to women’s lives. In the opening paragraph of Basran’s novel, Meena explains that she doesn’t wear a Kara anymore, and her mother does not push any of her daughters to wear

overly religious symbols like the Kara because, in The Mother's words, the daughters would learn restraint regardless of wearing a "bangle or not" (2). The disdain for religious prayers and practices is what Meena learns from her mother. Meena goes on to explain that her mother only forced her daughters to attend Gurdwara when they were invited and that her mother "didn't believe in lengthy prayers" because "they never helped" (57). The Mother knows that, as Sikh women, restraint is required. The idea of restraint is something that Meena tests repeatedly within the novel. The religious practice of wearing the Five Ks is only symbolic and not required within the narrative. The only religious teaching that Meena receives is from her Punjabi school, where she learns the Morning Prayer:

Ik Onkar

Satnam

Karta purukh

Nirbhau

Nirvair

Akal moorat

Ajuni saibhang

Gurparshad

Jap

That was the only prayer I learned, and I repeated it several times before asking my Punjabi Teacher what "Akal" meant. (13)

We learn her father's name at the beginning of the story because his name is in the "only prayer" that Meena learns, and she learns that "Akal" means "not subject to time or death" (13). Basran does not include the name of Meena's mother, nor is she given a first name. Rather, she is only known through her family position as Meena's mother, the widowed mother or the girls' mother (I will refer to her as The Mother in order to avoid confusion). The Mother has six daughters and no sons who could carry on the father's name. The Mother exists by being a widow and, despite living in Canada, she has to maintain the Sikh culture while raising her six daughters.

The cultural language is not supported at all in either of the narratives. For example, when Meena explains that The Mother "could not read" English or Punjabi, the plight of women's education becomes clear. In the first part of this chapter, I examined Kuldip Gill's poetry and outlined the marginal subject position of immigrant Sikh women coming to Canada in the early 1930s. These women became mothers and raised their daughters in Canada. Kuldip Gill embraces both of these subject positions in her poem "Travelling Through the Borderlands" where she is awe inspired by her mother, "I wonder how my mother survived without English" (*Dharma Rasa* 32). We do not forget the daughter, who is the "I" in the poem. The daughter who is a "four-and-a-half-year-old girl," was born in India but raised in Canada, and she is sharing the story of her journey as well as her mother's journey. The family's migration from "across oceans" in a "third-class hold" with her mother who "survived without English" is a celebratory women's survival poem of immigration. Throughout the poetry collection, the daughter learns how to speak English and Punjabi and is positioned as the knowledgeable person in the

family. However, the language is lost on Meena in Basran's narrative. Meena barely speaks Punjabi to her mother and explains her lack of interest in this loss of language: "I couldn't be bothered to make the effort, and answered my mother's Punjabi in English. I wondered how much was lost in this routine, which forced us to follow along a word at a time, or a word behind, interpreting what was said even when, for some expressions, there was no translation" (11). Because The Mother cannot read, she memorizes the religious hymns she needs to know by listening to them on her cassette player.

These coming of age narratives reveal how mothers and mothers-in-law control the lives of their daughters and daughters-in-law through religious traditions. But we learn, as the narratives unfold, that religion has little meaning and importance. Collectively, the mothers and the daughters do not have an overall understanding of Sikhism, but that does not matter, as we have seen in Gill's poetry. Religion collapses into a few terms or rituals and as Bell explains: "If it is at all accurate to say that ritualization controls — by modeling, defining, molding, and so on — it is this type of control that must be understood" (207). When the control is not understood, as in the case of Meena's married sisters, the abuse is repeated by everyone involved, by their husbands, mothers-in-law and so forth. The relationships between Sikh mothers and daughters in all the texts, so far, reveal how mothers re-enact patriarchy subconsciously and how the daughters are entrapped and controlled by these traditions.

Both Basran and Gill write about how gender and patriarchal conditions affect Sikh women's familial relationships. Basran's narrative reveals how religion and cultural traditions are complex negotiations for second-generation daughters as well as for their



Sikh mothers. Meena marries Sunny who is a corporate lawyer and is from a Punjabi Hindu family. After their arranged marriage, the mother-in-law changes Meena's name to Surinder. Both of these authors describe how girl children are raised to be subservient to their mothers' demands, and how, as young girls, they do not question their mothers' authority.

When the novel opens, Meena is living with her sisters and her mother in North Delta. Her mother is a widow and thus holds a subordinate position in the community; she has been in mourning for sixteen years. Meena's father died in an accident while working on the twentieth floor of an apartment building. The only way The Mother knows how to be a mother is by continuing the patterns of patriarchy. Barsan describes The Mother's entrapment within cultural and religious patriarchy when she describes how she re-enacts the mourning ritual every Sunday:

The guests were arriving. I heard the scurry of footsteps above as my mother took her place on the sofa and Tej rushed to get the door. I wondered how many people had come this time. Harj and I had always guessed, making a game of it. It was the only variable part of the ritual and even then it hardly varied...My mother sat on the sofa, head tilted, eyes weepy and withdrawn. I wondered if she were acting or if her grief after so many years could be this real. I'd never seen her cry without an audience; her tears were of little use when there was so much to be done, so many to care for. (12-13)

The Mother has to perform for the Sikh community because she is responsible for all her children and the pressure to get all the girls married to good Sikh men hinges on her

“good” behaviour and on the “good” name of the father. In the narrative, The Mother allows the Sikh community into her home after her husband’s death, and she must maintain the grief ritual for as long as possible in order to be seen as a good Sikh mother. The ritual itself becomes a way the Sikh extended family and to some extent the surrounding Sikh community can “culturally police” the widow and her unwed daughters. In this way, the “cultural police” or the “potential in-laws” uphold the father’s honour and can still inspect the potential brides. The performance of the ritual is important here because, as Basran makes clear, The Mother knows her subject position exceptionally well, and it is through the eyes of Meena that we see the effects of the cultural policing power. For example, when Meena’s second husband Liam is pushed off a balcony by her first husband Sunny, sometime after the funeral, Meena’s mother comes to the house on a Sunday with the extended family expecting Meena to carry out the grief ritual. Meena demands that everyone leave her house because she does not want to get caught in the cycle:

“No, Mom, I’m not you.” I looked around at my sisters, who were moving in and out of the room like ghosts, tiptoeing around the memories of the dead — in the same way we’d built our lives around my mother’s grief.

“I can’t do this, I don’t want to be good at this...and why are you even here? You didn’t even know him,” I said to Kishor Auntie. “Neither of you did. You should both be ashamed.” (244)

The cycle of grief and the cycle of patriarchy overlap. Meena refuses to be caught in these cycles and demands her freedom to grieve privately; she does not want to be

policed by her family or by the surrounding community. The death of Liam and the death of Akal, Meena's father, take precedence over the relationship between Meena and her mother. Even though Meena has no memory of her father, she knows his name, and it is his name that she recites in the opening prayer at Liam's graveside. The father's absence could indicate the loss of the patriarchal figure within Meena's household. However, the father is ubiquitous and he does not need to be physically present in order to maintain his position in the patriarchy. Meena's mother maintains the patriarchy order in the household and by doing so meets the approval of the broader community. She does this by forcing her daughters to marry and to accept physical and emotional abuse by their husbands, their husbands' families and the surrounding Sikh community. In her first marriage, when Meena's mother-in-law changes Meena's name for better luck, The Mother does not attempt to stand up for her daughter at all, even though it was Meena's father who named his sixth daughter.

The Mother also maintains the women's roles within the religious hierarchy. As Nayar reminds us from her interviews of Sikh women in Vancouver, "it is imperative for a young maturing girl to maintain her virginity in order to be marriageable even as she simultaneously acquires the skills necessary for married life" (*Sikh Women* 257). Meena is highly aware of the surveillance that she and her sisters are under. A stark example of this is when Meena has begun her affair with Liam and is walking home from his house. She wonders if any of the aunties living on the street have seen her:

As I walked home I wondered if the aunties on the street have seen me leave  
Liam's house, and if they did, whether they would report back to my mother. My

sisters and I referred to them as the Indian Intelligence Association. As members of the IIA they were induced by their morals to spend their afternoons looking out windows, gathering gossip and delicious details that they spread through a game of broken telephone. They were a blend of town crier and gossip columnist who spun stories like webs, occasionally devouring victims like my sister Harj. (48-49)

It is in this paragraph that we read how Sikh women abuse one another by gossiping.

These IIA or aunties resurface again in Gill's memoir when she states that she will not "dedicate more pages to my very pathetic love life" for three reasons. The first reason is that

Indians are the most judgmental race the good Lord ever created. This judgment is reserved almost exclusively for the women of the race...At least ten Indian families we know have spread various rumours about how they've seen me working on the street corner or dancing in the background of a Sir Mix-a-Lot video. (101)

Gill attempts to make light of the surveillance but by doing so she rationalizes her silence around the topic. She does not want to engage in any dialogue about her dating because as she states in point number two, "most parents in traditional Sikh families absolutely do care" about the image of their daughters out in the public and she does not want to provide the reasons for her parent's "heart attacks" (101).

The ongoing surveillance of Sikh girls growing up in Canada is something that I will discuss in the following chapter on Mehta's film *Heaven on Earth*, when Chand is accused of lying that she was with her husband in the bedroom (when, in fact, it was her

imaginary husband that was with her) and this lands her in trouble with her in-law family. She very innocently explains to her husband and his family that she was speaking to her husband, but they do not believe her since another member of the community (the tenant) is the witness they need to dismiss her story. As a consequence, she is beaten by her husband who accuses her of having an affair. The hyper-surveillance of young Sikh women proves that they cannot be trusted to live according to the cultural and religious traditions and expectations. In neither Basran's novel nor Mehta's film are independent Sikh women visible. If and when they are shown as being independent, they are not seen as powerful figures within their own lives. For example, when Chand realizes that she is not living in a "Canadian heaven" and that she has to find her way out of the abusive household, Mehta cuts off the audience as Chand walks out at the end of the film. In Basran's novel, Harjinder is a ghostlike figure in Meena's life and does not re-enter the narrative to aid her sisters. Harjinder is too disconnected from her family and cultural roots and Meena understands why: "Somehow I understood this self-imposed exile that kept us all in a loose orbit of one another, the controlled distance a delusion of freedom" (229). Harjinder refuses to call their mother or visit the rest of the family. Meena attempts to explain their mother's behaviour to her sister but Harjinder does not agree with Meena's assessment. The relationship between the sisters is strained and remains this way even at the conclusion of the story. In comparison, in her memoir, Gill explains to the readers that she accepts that she and her parents do not have a close relationship in the way that parents and children on television might have, but she has come to terms with this as a fact of life in Canada.

The notion of a woman living alone without a man was part of Meena's upbringing. The night before she is to meet Sunny and his family for the first time, she attempts to envision her mother's life after she is married and living apart from her mother:

I tried to picture how my mother's night might pass when I was gone and married and she was truly alone. My dadi [grandmother] had once told my mother that a woman without a husband was incomplete, but a woman without a husband and children was not a woman at all — she was simply an apparition haunting her own life. (98)

However, when Liam dies, Meena feels incomplete and reciprocates when Kal, Sunny's cousin, expresses interest in becoming something more to Meena. By the end of the novel, Kal waits for Meena and Meena reciprocates the feelings she has for Kal. With Liam's death, Meena becomes independent and has a closer relationship with her mother. Meena's sister Harjinder (or Harj for short) is the only sister that completely removes herself from the patriarchal structure as well as from the surveillance of the aunties. She learned that their surveillance does not mean that they will protect her. In one scene Harjinder is walking home from school and is sexually assaulted by a group of young men. The IIA did nothing to stop the young men. However, they did tell Meena's mother and Harjinder was blamed for the attack and beaten by her mother for causing it to happen. Harjinder runs away from home. When Meena's mother and uncle try to locate her they cannot find her. Years later when Meena is living downtown with her second husband Liam, she runs into Harjinder. Meena describes Harjinder as looking like a

ghost: “She wasn’t as I had remembered her — still tall, but now somehow stretched, as if all her features had been pulled up; her once-chiselled face now seemed edgy, her cheeks like cliffs and her eyes like caverns” (227). Of the six young sisters, Harjinder is the only one who has a lifestyle that does not include any religious or cultural aspects. Even though these daughters were raised in Canada, they have little to no physical space to understand themselves or to think for themselves. Connecting this back to Kuldip Gill’s poetry, the women who are left behind in India, the bride or the wife travelling on the *Empress of Japan* to Canada, do not have a space of their own to read letters; rather, they read letters in the early morning or under the moonlight. Because she is absent, Harjinder is the only sister that haunts the sisters’ narrative. When Meena asks her sister Serena if she ever thinks about Harj, Serena replies, “‘All the time,’ glancing around the room before leaving. ‘All the time.’ She smiled even though her eyes were sad” (99).

Harj is a warning signal for the rest of the sisters. The message being sent is not to fall out of line; because they do not hold any power in the household or within the nation, they have no other choice. When Meena runs into Harj, she pushes Harj to call their mother, because after giving birth to her own daughter, Meena seems to understand her mother and tries to explain to Harj, her new understanding: “My mother always said that one day I’d understand and I wondered if I was finally beginning too. ‘We’re her daughters. We’re all she has’” (228). How does Meena continue to be part of her mother’s life yet at the same time disengage from the cultural police’s surveillance? The answer to this question is simple: she cannot disengage, like her sister Harjinder, because she feels she has to maintain a connection with her mother. Here comes the hard part of

feminism: How do we continue to engage with our mothers when often it is us, the daughters, who are physically in the line of fire? Has feminism failed us? This is a big question and a compelling one; it opens the door to how Sikh women view their rights and how they see themselves as women. I will address the idea of Sikh feminism in the last chapter and what that could possibly mean.

When Meena's sister tells her to forget about applying to creative writing school and she can do what she wants once she is married, Meena replies, "When I'm married? Then I'll just be someone else's daughter and someone's wife. When will I get to be who *I am?*" (Basran 31). Meena understands that generally, as women, you cannot "do what you want" until you are married and this troubles her because, as the youngest of six sisters, she has seen the bruises on her older sisters and seen how unhappy they are in their arranged marriages. The forced marriage of Chand in Mehta's film and Meena's lack of agency in Basran's narrative address how Sikh women are still uneducated about their rights in Canada.

On the other hand, the Canadian identity that is valued and desired by Gill in her memoir is a cultural mix, evident in her revelation that her "Christmas gift to herself was booking a trip to L.A." (264). Gill favours giving gifts at Christmas time and she even converts her parents to celebrating the commercial holiday: "One night during the holidays my mom brought out a bag and presented us all with our gifts. We all got a plain long-sleeved shirt" (260). She holds on to self-esteem and paves the way for her sisters to travel to New Zealand. At the end of the memoir, Gill is unmarried and this does not stop her from "going forward" with her life. When Gill imagines her future with children, she



imagines telling them stories about how their grandparents “left India to make a brighter future for themselves.” Gill’s recovery of herself becomes a new narrative for women; she shows that it is possible for women to be in control of their lives and their own narratives.

The Mother cannot live without a husband, the father becomes a ghostlike figure in the household and Meena does not follow the same grief ritual as her mother does. This break in the cycle allows Meena to move forward in her grief and life. The Mother does not empower her daughters to leave abusive relationships but rather supports the patriarchy by sending her daughters back and continuing the cycle of abuse. The daughters, the second generation, cannot continue to negotiate the codes of patriarchal behaviour; there is a breaking point. For example, Gill articulates clearly, “I had a desire to keep doing right by myself” (262). For Meena, in Basran’s text, the breaking point is slightly different. In my critical reading of Basran’s text, the recovery and self-knowledge is still in process, but we know that Meena does not hold on to religious or cultural traditions. Meena respects her mother for all the supports she provided for Meena after Liam’s death and through her grief. For Meena, she also creates an alternative path or way of life.

These writers, Kuldip Gill, Gurjinder Basran and Rupinder Gill, foreground the older women or mothers, whose life stories are being told by their daughters, granddaughters or by multigenerational Sikh women in the family. When I read their works together as a collective whole or as “*confluence of narratives*” (Brah 180), what emerges is, one, a collective memory of historical events that have impacted women and

that serve as a starting point for Sikh women, and two, individuals transformed through this collective memory and re-memory (Brah 180). I began to understand what Carol Shields meant by

yearning for narratives, for characters that approximate the world as we know it; characters who in their struggle for the world resemble ourselves; dilemmas which remind us of our own predicaments; scenes that trigger our memories or tap into our yearnings; and conclusions that shorten that distance between what is privately felt and universally known, so that we look up for the printed page and say 'Ah-hah.' (Goertz and Eden 22)

When I read these works, it resonate with a very particular subject position that I understand: that of growing up as and being a Sikh woman in Canada. These second-generation Sikh women have grown up in Canada and are changing and altering what it means to be part of a cultural religious community as well as what it means to Canadian. I am aware that a narrative “has the power, dangerous or useful, to normalize the marginal” (Goertz and Eden 35). Their writings answer the question of what it means to be “Canadian,” “Woman” and “Sikh” simultaneously. In the next chapter, I look at the 2008 film, *Heaven on Earth* by Deepa Mehta and she presents to the viewer two very different Sikh households. Mehta’s film, directly shows us the realities of Sikh women’s lives and how being “Canadian,” “Woman” and “Sikh” simultaneously is a fraught position. Mehta takes it one step further and adds another position for women, that is the position of being an immigrant. At the end of the film, we witness an assertive, liberated and influential image of the “ideal Sikh woman.”

### Chapter Three

#### A Shattered Sikh Household in Deepa Mehta's film *Heaven on Earth*

Visual images . . . are congealed social relations, formalizing in themselves either relations of dominations or those of resistance. The politics of images is the same as any other politics; it is about being the subjects, not the objects, of the world we live in.

—Himani Bannerji, "Popular Images of South Asian Women"

Film director Deepa Mehta recreates the Canadian Sikh household in her 2008 film *Heaven on Earth*.<sup>16</sup> The film focuses on domestic and family abuse within a Sikh Canadian household. The main character of the film is the young Sikh woman Chand who has left her family and her mother in Ludhiana, Northern Punjab, India, and travelled to Canada by herself to marry Rocky, a man she has never met. She and Rocky are married at a local Gurdwara and afterwards head to Niagara Falls for a honeymoon night at a motel. However, Rocky's mother Maji and his brother-in-law Baldev arrive at the motel because Maji had a dream that her son was in an accident and she forces her son-in-law to drive her to Niagara Falls to double check that her son is safe. Rocky tells his mother that he is fine and that she should sleep in the "honeymoon" room with

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<sup>16</sup> Chand is played by Bollywood film star Preity Zinta. Rocky is played by actor Vansh Bhardwaj. Rocky's mother Maji is played by Balinder Johal and Rocky's father Papji is played by Rajinder Singh Cheema. Brother-in-law Baldev is played by Gourrav Sihan and the sister-in-law Aman is played by Ramanjit Kaur. Their son Kabir is played by Orville Maciel and their daughter Loveleen is played by Geetika Sharma.

Chand. When Chand suggests that they get another room, Rocky surprisingly and aggressively slaps her across the face and asks her, “Who asked you?” Rocky and Baldev sleep in the car and Chand is left in the room with her mother-in-law who demands that Chand massage her legs, which she does as she is crying. Afterwards, as Chand is washing her face to sooth the pain from the slap, she stares at herself in the mirror and begins a monologue in which she recites a folk tale about a cobra and a girl. Chand uses these monologues throughout the film as a way of comforting herself after each episode of abuse, which, it turns out, will be many.

I first saw the film in 2008 at a Toronto press screening, a few days prior to it being publicly released in theatres across Canada. When the film was over, I was highly emotional and I knew it would take a few months before I could watch the film again. A few weeks later, my mother, who lives in Ottawa, phoned and explained that she had watched the film with a few of her Sikh women friends and they had a few questions about it. I could imagine my mother’s friends phoning their daughters to discuss and analyze its meaning. Throughout the phone conversation with my mother, she raised three questions: Where does Chand go at the end? Why was some of the film in black and white? What does the folk tale of a snake have to do with Sikhism? As I answered these questions, the craft and power of Mehta’s film became very clear to me. My mother’s questions addressed the larger issues about women’s empowerment, the “Canadian dream” and the correlation between Sikh religion and culture. These three questions frame this chapter and I examine the term “transnational” in relation to the film and this discourse of feminism.

### Introducing Director Deepa Mehta

Deepa Mehta was born in Amritsar, India, and immigrated to Canada in 1973. Her father was a film distributor in India and she grew up watching all types of films. Mehta's first feature film *Sam & Me* (1991) won an honourable Mention in the Caméra D'Or Special Distinction at the Cannes Film Festival. Ranjit Chowdhry, writer and actor who was also featured in the film, captures the emotional struggles and friendship between a young Indian immigrant and an elderly Jewish man. This film launched Mehta's career as a director. Her second film *Camilla* (1994) was written by Paul Quarrington and captured the friendship of two women who travel together from the southern U.S. to Toronto for a concert. In an interview with movie critic Judy Gerstel of *The Toronto Star*, Mehta expressed her disappointment with her second film because she did not have a final director's cut. Therefore, when shooting her third film *Fire*, Mehta wrote and directed the film herself and controlled the film's production. In the late nineties, Mehta had returned to India to film *Fire*, which narrates the lives of Radha and Nita, two sisters-in-law who fall in love with one another and who, at the conclusion of the film, run away from their husbands. The film was showcased in smaller film festivals and opened in Canada, making a splash at its debut at the 1996 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). It was released in India two years later. The controversy over its lesbian storyline and the portrayal of Indian Hindu women led to the possible banning of the film. Mehta's film was given approval to be released by the Indian Central Board of Film Certification with one change: the name Sita had to be changed to Nita in the Hindi translation.

Shohini Ghosh, a documentary filmmaker on sex workers in India, illuminates the reason for the request:

This change was clearly recommended as a precautionary measure so as not to offend the Hindu Right, as the two women—Radha and Sita—had been named after two revered female goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, Sita, the dutiful, self-effacing wife of Ram, the principal protagonist of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, is considered by the Hindu Right to be the epitome of womanhood. (22)

Mehta did make the name change but she did not make any cuts to the film. When *Fire* was released in India in forty-two theatres in 1998, there were many protests by the Hindu Right to have the film banned<sup>17</sup> because the portrayal of Indian women as lesbians was considered disrespectful. This, despite the fact that the name was changed. As Geeta Patel explains, the “shift in names articulate an awareness of modern evocations of Indian womanhood that signify through the mythic character Sita” (223). The Canadian media reported on the protests in India:

The right-wing Shiv Sena party began targeting Bombay theatres . . .

Theatres were stormed, patrons forced to leave, cinema managers beaten up, display windows broken and promotional posters burned by outraged mobs.

The party [right-wing Shiv Sena] considers the story of a love affair between

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<sup>17</sup> See Shohini Ghosh’s *Fire: A Queer Film Classic* in which she argues that *Fire* enabled mainstream Indian audiences to watch and read film “queerly.” Patel’s “On Fire: Sexuality and Its Incitements” provides a month-by-month history of its release in India.

two middle-class women as a distortion of Indian culture and an assault on traditional family values. (Green A29)

Very little reporting was focused on the reaction to the film from South Asian communities in Canada. The film gained attention in Canada because of the riots in India.

When *Fire* was released in Canada, I was living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and attending my second year of university. I was compelled to find the film and watch it by myself. My reactions were to defend the film as it presented an idea of women who wanted choice and freedom in their lives. I understood the hostile reaction because it did not fit into the genres of Bollywood films or religious films. Rather, the film demanded unpacking many layers of language, literature, religion, sexuality and cinema techniques. I was struck by the South Asian community's reaction to the film. Mehta was somewhat supported in Canada, but in my research I cannot find a reaction or a newspaper article that would have reflected the outcry of the South Asian Community in Winnipeg or in the rest of the country.

*Fire* was fiercely debated publicly and discussed in academic circles in Canada, Britain and India after its release. As Mehta's daughter Devyani Saltzman eloquently writes, *Fire* "put my mother on the map as an international, and controversial, filmmaker" (19). I wanted to provide this personal context because since the release of *Fire*, Mehta and her films have become well known in India and in Canada, in both South Asian and mainstream communities. She has been called the "transnational" filmmaker.

She has been able to cinematically capture emotions on the screen and tell narratives that are new to a mainstream Hollywood audience and to a Bollywood audience.

That same year, I watched Mehta's film *Earth* (1998), the second film in Mehta's "elements trilogy." The film was a close adaptation of the novel *Cracking India* (1991) by Bapsi Sidhwa, and it reflects how women bear the burden of war. Both the novel and the film focus on the Partition in India and the callous disregard for women's lives on both sides of the division. Mehta was not given permission to film in Lahore, Pakistan, so she filmed it in India. It was released without incident. In 2000, Mehta returned to India to film *Water*, the final film in her trilogy. *Water* follows the lives of four widows in Varanasi (also known as Banaras), a city in Uttar Pradesh. Many Hindu widows are sent there to live after their husbands die. In her 2005 publication *In Shooting Water: A Mother-Daughter Journey and the Marking of a Film*, Devyani Saltzman gives readers a close-up view of how Mehta and her film crew struggled with the Indian government as it shut down production and with the religious Hindu right that protested the portrayal of Hinduism in a negative light. As a result, Mehta had to leave India and abandon the shooting of the film there (Ghosh; Saltzman). She relocated the production of the film to Sri Lanka, where she worked on it for five years. *Water* was released in North America in November 2005 and was nominated for an Oscar in the category of Best Foreign Language Film of the Year (Canada). In Canada, it was nominated for nine Genie Awards, winning three of these in the categories Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role, Achievement in Cinematography and Achievement in Music (Original Score).



Knowing Mehta's history of interpreting religious elements in her films through a feminist lens, I was expecting an explosion of controversy when she began shooting her 2008 film *Heaven on Earth* in Toronto and in India. Mehta had received permission to film a small part of the story in Ludhiana in the Punjab. When she completed her work there, she relocated to Brampton, Ontario, where the majority of the film takes place. The film encountered no protest by any group, religious or otherwise. Instead, its release was met with silence by the media, film critics and academics. I was also surprised that given Mehta's reputation as a filmmaker and having won three Genies in Canada, that *Heaven on Earth* did not make any controversial splash at the time of its release. Even the response by the Sikh Canadian community was limited. Despite the low-key attention to the film, it managed to win two Genie Awards in 2009. But still, it has received little attention elsewhere. For example, when I presented a version of this chapter at the South Asian Literary Association's annual conference in January of 2011, the audience had not seen the film and did not know that Mehta had made another film after *Water*. I had to question and evaluate the reason for this lack of attention. First, I suspect it was because of the subject matter of domestic violence. Second, that it was domestic violence of racialized women within their own enclaves within Ontario. And third, it shattered any notions of the Canadian dream, if there was such a dream to be had.

As a contemporary popular genre, film offers the possibility for multiple, contradictory levels of reading. I chose to discuss this film because it signals to the viewer that this isolation and ghettoization of Sikh women is happening in Canada. It is important to analyze the ties that bind this film together, that is, the religious and

patriarchal notions of religion and culture, the destabilization of the myth of the “Canadian dream” and the focus on Sikh women’s subjectivity. These smart educated young brides from India come to Canada with degrees, and yet they reach Canada through arranged marriages and, once here, they have little to no power within the household and within the community. Kanwal Mand has researched the lives of Sikh women in Britain and concludes, “Sikh women conceptualized their movements based on their identities as wives and mothers. Indeed, Sikh women have not moved either historically or in contemporary times across national boundaries to Tanzania or Britain for the purposes of earning a wage” (355). However, in the film, Mehta visually explains the layers of work that women have to excel at in order to “cross national boundaries,” as Mand has suggested. Even though Chand explains to her sister-in-law that she has a degree, it does not matter. At some point, Chand starts work at the laundry cleaners with Aman. After a few weeks of work, Chand does not receive her paycheque and, when she questions her boss, he explains that her salary is under her husband’s name. This is a clear example of domination and control over Chand’s family life. These women are now considered part of the household income and have to contribute money. At the end of the film, Chand walks out of the house with only her passport. The image of a Sikh woman walking out of the house with her passport in hand is an image that has not been presented this clearly in any other South Asian Canadian film.

Mehta has been labelled a transnational filmmaker and her films have been included in the genre of transnational feminist films. Transnational film or cinema, as defined by Ezra and Rowden,

arises in the interstices between the local and the global. Because of the intimacy and communal dynamic in which films are usually experienced, cinema has singular capacity to foster bonds of recognition between different groups. . . these bonds of recognition, however, must not be confused with the false unity imposed by discourses that lump all sites of local identity together in opposition to some nebulously deindividualizing global force. (4)

Mehta's creates films that are centred on representing female subjectivity and how it is inscribed, lived and transferred from one nation to another (Levitin). This transnational feminist framework in *Heaven on Earth* explores the ways in which Sikh women can (or cannot) empower themselves and live the life they have dreamed of attaining. Sikh culture and religion are aspects that represent Sikh female subjectivity. In *Heaven on Earth*, Mehta's visualization of how Sikh women move from one nation to another is embedded in these Sikh religious and cultural traditions. However, Mehta constructs feminist authority in her films by refusing certain modes of representation, and she challenges and rejects the limitations religion places on women. By presenting audiences with several Sikh women in the film, women who take up various roles and positions, she is able to show the impact of cultural and religious traditions on women and how women have come to understand each other within "the local" and the "global." At times the these different groups are very similar, but because of the diasporic movement the "bonds of recognition" is opaque and complex. The transnational is grounded in the interpretations of the local and the global and the complex impact of these interpretations

on Sikh women. To illustrate this, I look at Sikh women's roles in both the Indian household and the Canadian household as portrayed in *Heaven on Earth*.

### **“The Local” Sikh Indian Household: Faith and Stability**

*Heaven on Earth* is located in a Sikh religious household in two different countries, India and Canada, and the thread that connects these two nations is the Sikh religion. Mehta shot the film in Ludhiana, Northern Punjab, and both the Indian family and the Canadian family speak Punjabi. Mehta uses religious elements to set the atmosphere of the entire film. Religion is the site in which cultural exchanges occur and an understanding of Sikh religious beliefs and cultural lifestyles becomes a visual aspect in the film. The Indian Sikh household is only shown in the first five minutes of the film. In the DVD commentary, Mehta states that she wanted the household scenes in India “to have a certain stability” which she achieved by filming in 35 mm to provide a crisp and clear film quality (“Feature Commentary,” *Heaven on Earth*). It is through these crisp visuals and images that the audience sees Chand and her family as living in a loving and caring household. When Mehta filmed the first part of the movie in India, she had no problems with the local governments or with any religious groups. It is important to remember that Mehta's history of filming in India has been dubious at best while filming in Canada has been a productive and supportive experience for the director. There are very few religious symbolic ornaments of the religion within Chand's home in India, and this is important to remember because when Chand moves to her in-laws' home in Canada, the living room is filled with Sikh religious pictures, such as the Ten Gurus and

the Golden Temple.

These opening scenes of the movie are crucial for the overall development of the main character and her relationship towards both nations. The film begins with a *Sangeet*, a party for women and children before a wedding. The reason the audience will know that it is a Sikh party is because of the Punjabi language being spoken and sung. Other religious markers are the young Sikh boys wearing topknots and watching the *Sangeet*. It is more difficult, though, to mark the women as being Sikh since they do not wear turbans nor is it easy to see if they are wearing Karas among the many bangles on their wrists. The camera captures the women who are dancing and feeling joyous about the marriage. As Chand gets up to dance with her mother, the camera cuts to a long-distance shot and you see that the *Sangeet* is under a tent decorated with lights against the darkness of the night. The image is warm and will be a guiding light for Chand as she embarks on her journey. As the women celebrate, the *Sangeet* glows with laughter, music and dancing. From the songs they are singing, the audience realizes that both Chand's grandmother and mother are present at the *Sangeet*.



Figure 3.1. Chand's *Sangeet* in *Heaven on Earth*. DVD still.

The *Sangeet* is the last place where we see Chand's connection to her family and her homeland of India, and where we, as the audience, see what a loving mother and a supportive network of women look like for Chand. There is a complete absence of men in the Indian scene. The network of women or mothers creates a protective bubble around their daughters. Neither in India nor in Canada do we see Chand's father or bother, but we hear their voices over the telephone when Chand phones home from Canada. At those times, her mother is kept away from the phone and Chand is unable to speak to her. On the one hand, Chand's mother provides a certain amount of freedom for her daughter. For example, we later learn that Chand has a degree from a university, which suggests that she had a certain freedom growing up. But, on the other hand, Chand's mother sends her to Canada, without knowing the full details of the in-law family.

Chand's mother taught her stories about the cobra and Guru Gulab Singh. Chand's connection to religion is through her mother and these religious folktales.

Folktales and religious stories are one and the same. Some of these religious stories would be found in the Adi Granth; however, some of them have been passed down through oral storytelling. What we see here is a fluidity of religious expressions and rituals that Chand links back to her mother's stories for strength and protection. The tale that Chand's mother recites is about Guru Gulab Singh and she describes how he was walking to Hemkuth Sahib, which is in the Indian Himalayas. Along the way, Gulab Singh meets a cobra and explains to the cobra that one can protect herself without hurting anyone else. It is through this folktale that Chand's mother is trying to teach her daughter how to protect herself. Once she is in Canada, it is these stories that Chand recites to herself in times of crisis and after the episodes of violent domestic abuse. The stories she recites addresses her need for freedom and her longing to fly back to her mother. In the last scene set in India, Chand's mother explains to her:

Don't joke all the time. We all have our strengths. Use yours, if you have to. Besides, the family you are marrying into is known to your uncle. Have faith. Don't be scared.<sup>18</sup>

The mother is insisting that her daughter defend herself and use her own strengths if she has to. Further, she is attempting to ease her daughter's fears by stating that if she needs help she should call her uncle and "have faith." When she reaches Canada and is married to Rocky, her uncle proves not to be helpful and, therefore, Chand can only depend on her faith and the stories that she has learned from her mother, through which she comes to know her own power. The conversation between mother and daughter sets the loving

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<sup>18</sup> In Punjabi, the word "ddhilnaa- na" means "don't be scared." In the subtitles it is translated as "don't be nervous." I think "don't be scared" is more accurate.

tone of their relationship, and it is what Chand draws on when she faces the abuse in her marriage in a strange land.



Figure 3.2. Chand in the motel bathroom in *Heaven on Earth*. DVD still.

Midway into the movie, Chand is in the bathroom of the motel room recovering from the first slap and emotional beating. She writes her Indian address on the wall, leans forward and places her forehead against the address. This visual image has the resemblance of bowing to the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the Gurdwara: Chand's head is covered and she is trying to "keep the faith" or keep her strength as her mother told her to do back home. Here the image of the homeland is salvation and protection. When Chand retells herself folktales and looks at herself in the mirror, she is trying to maintain her sense of self and identity. Mehta has a unique way of filming emotions and capturing a woman's gestures and the stolen moments she finds for herself. She creates a new way to see beyond the film image.



### **The Precarious Canadian Sikh Household**

When Chand begins to understand her subjectivity within the Canadian household, it contradicts everything she was taught in India. On the day of her departure, her mother comes to wake her up and the audience sees a photo of her soon-to-be-husband on the ledge of her headboard. However, the scene is quick and as an audience member you would have to have a quick eye to see Rocky's photo. When she first meets Rocky at the Toronto airport, the audience begins to realize that this is an arranged marriage. Soon after her arrival, her wedding to Rocky is held at the local Gurdwara in Brampton, and shortly thereafter, the abuse begins. The house is full not only with Chand and Rocky but with his parents, his sister and her husband and their two children. Life for Chand soon becomes unstable. Whatever she thought Canada might be is not what it is turning out to be. In contrast to the filming in India, Mehta filmed the Canadian scenes in 16 mm on handheld cameras that created visually unstable and grainy images, intentionally capturing on film the reality that Chand was beginning to experience.

In the "Feature Commentary with the Director," Mehta explains that she decided to use real locations and not a film set to give an "authentic" look to the film. She wanted to use the "tiny houses" because she found through her research that the families living in them have no privacy within their households. In the film, the family is working two or three jobs and is sending all their money back to India to their own family. When Chand first arrives, she gives her mother-in-law dowry money of twenty thousand Canadian dollars. The mother-in-law gives it to Rocky and tells him to count it. Mehta captures the cramped space of the household and as an audience member you feel it in every room,

especially after the violent abuse. The house offers no privacy or space to breathe to anyone in the family. To showcase the isolation of Chand, the abusive behaviour of Rocky and the coldness of their relationship, Mehta switches to black and white film. The warmth of India and a loving family is a thing of the past.

The film highlights how Canada is not “heaven on earth” for Chand or for other members of the household. Instead, Canada has become “hell on earth” on many levels. Chand vocalizes this reality when her family in India, in particular her brother and father, demand that she sponsor their immigration to Canada. Chand asks them over the phone, “What do you want to do here? There is nothing here.” The “here” is Canada and for Chand there is nothing “here” but physical violence, lack of agency and the lack of a supportive women’s community. A young Sikh woman leaving her Indian homeland and immigrating to Canada is not a new topic of discussion. What is new is that Mehta has captured it on film.<sup>19</sup>

Within the Canadian Sikh household, Mehta represents the women as being subservient and “religious (read: not progressive), family-oriented (read: traditional), legally unsophisticated (read: they are still not conscious of their rights), illiterate (read: ignorant), domestic (read: backward)” (Mohanty 40). Mehta restructures the image and representation of the “Third World” South Asian woman. Chand’s subject position in the film is progressive and empowered: Chand is educated and she is not ignorant of her surroundings. She knows her legal rights, for example, when she is at the factory and asks

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<sup>19</sup> See Kamala E. Nayar’s text, *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver: Three Generations Amid Tradition, Modernity, and Multiculturalism*.

her boss for her paycheque. When she leaves the house at the end of the story, she takes money, jewelry and, most importantly, her passport.

When my mother asked me, “Where does she go at the end?” the question rattled me. I would like to think that Chand would go to her friend Rosa’s house. My mother has lived in Canada since the late 1970s and does not realize what type of assistance is available to her and other women, yet she has helped Sikh women in abusive situations. This lack of awareness by Sikh women across the generations is very real. In the film, the second-generation Loveleen and Karbir, who are both under the age of fifteen, do not have any power within the household. They follow the patriarchal script that the family follows as well. In *Culturally Driven Violence Against Women: A Growing Problem in Canada’s Immigrant Communities*, Aruna Papp argues that violence against women and patriarchal power can be more “intense at home than abroad” and that “honour violence is perpetrated unilaterally within the family: against girls and women by male relatives such as fathers, fathers-in-law, brothers, brothers-in-law, husbands and occasionally sons — often with the complicity of older females” (13-15). This statement supports Mehta’s film. Karbir, the son/grandson also physically abuses his sister, Loveleen, he hides his grandfather’s teeth and when Chand is beaten by Rocky, it is Karbir who walks the battered Chand to the bedroom, pushes her onto the bed and leaves. The cycle of abuse is clearly continuing with Karbir. At the conclusion of the film, however, when Chand leaves the house, she demonstrates to Karbir and Lovleen that they do not have to continue supporting the patriarchal order or follow the roles that we prescribed for them. Chand’s departure at the end is a visual lesson for both the children and adult family

members. It takes a new immigrant woman to show the Canadian Sikh household that things have to change for women.

### *How Sikhism Is Situated in the Film*

Melanie J. Wright, a leading scholar in the field of religion and film, suggests that the study of religion and film is narrowly focused and therefore the move “towards an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from the practices both of religious studies and of film and cinema studies” (6) results in an informed understanding of film, religion and culture from various faith positions. Further, there are fewer articles that touch upon women or feminism in religion and film. Thus Mehta’s film and its inclusion of Sikh religious symbols and elements broaden the theme of religion and the effect of religion on women.

Another element that Mehta contrasts in the film is how the Indian Sikh household does not contain the many religious images and figurines found in the Canadian household. Mehta removes all the men from the first five minutes of the film, and she does not include in the opening scenes (or chooses not to) any religious ornaments in Chand’s home in India. In comparison, the Canadian home is decorated with religious clocks and pictures of gurus, and every corner seems to be draped with religious ornaments; for example, we see and hear religious hymns when the family is watching religious programming from the Golden Temple in Amritsar and when Rocky and Chand get married in the Gurdwara. We see a religious calendar when Chand is in the kitchen and in a few of the long shots of the hall way. What is fascinating is how the

Canadian Sikh household has to be draped in religious ornaments in order for it to be seen as a Sikh household. In the Figure 3.3 screen shot, Chand has just arrived from India and has entered her in-laws home for the first time. The women are bookended by the men and, above the couch where the women are sitting, are two pictures, one of Guru Nanak and the other of the Tenth Guru.

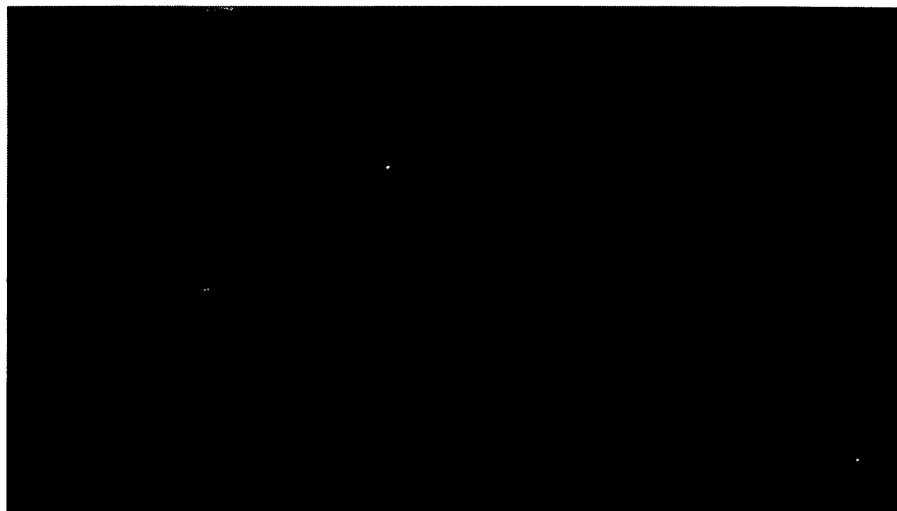


Figure 3.3. Chand and her in-laws from *Heaven on Earth*. DVD still.

Mehta articulates through film how the teachings of religion are not exposed in the same way. In Canada, the Sikh family only knows how to identify with their religion through religious ornaments, photographs and television programs; Mehta crafts a Canadian Sikh household through these religious ornaments and we realize these — religious markers are void of any meaning for the family. Whereas in the Indian Sikh household, the only indication of it being Sikh is through the language being spoken and through the religious folktales that Chand's mother teaches her. In fact, the folktales and the images of her parents' home are the key elements that help Chand to survive in her

in-laws' home. I understand that I might be making an argument that religion in India is somehow a more natural way of being; however, that is not the argument I want to make. As I have stated in the previous chapters, through Kuldip Gill's poetry, Rupinder Gill's memoir and Basran's novel, the second and third generations of Sikh women do not participate fully in the daily goings-on of life in the Gurdwara. Rather, religion for Gill and the others collapses into symbols or phrases such as "Vah Guru" to show that religion has become normalized within the community. Mehta creates the visual Canadian Sikh household through the use of symbols and pictures, and so on. However, as we see on the screen, it is nothing like the homeland that we were shown in the first five minutes of the film.

In the later part of the story, Chand is put to a test. She is required to pull a cobra out of its coil without being bitten. When Chand is able to pull out the cobra without being bitten, she becomes the image of a Goddess. The image is powerful and the visual representation of the halo behind Chand's head suggests that she is a powerful figure; a positive aspect of religion. Mehta explains that the scene was filmed on a cold afternoon as the sun was setting and that the image of Chand with the glow behind her head was unintentional ("Feature Commentary," *Heaven on Earth*). However, the glow behind Chand's head is reminiscent of various photos and reproductions of the paintings of Sikh gurus, including many of Guru Nanak dating back to the early twentieth century (Brown; Jain). One of the earliest paintings was painted in the late 1530s (McLeod; Brown). This image of Chand is powerful and it is the first time in the film that we see her standing up

for herself. The cobra, the halo and the image all work together to create an alternative image of a Sikh woman.



Figure 3.4. Chand as Goddess from *Heaven on Earth*. DVD still.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I take a look at Sikh women wearing turbans and suggest that an alternative image for Sikh women is needed. While Mehta's representation may not be the same as the image of a woman in a turban, she does create a representation of a woman who resists the cycle of violence and abuse. For me, the image of Chand with the cobra is a powerful reminder of how women can translate and transmit new ways of knowing and living in the world. Many women embody religious ideals and have to fulfill a role in order to survive, but Mehta shows us that there is another way to sidestep these ideals and roles.

#### *Role of the Matriarch*

*Heaven on Earth* visualizes a "truth" in the Sikh Community, the truth of patriarchy and violence within Canadian households. However, the film also illustrates

how Sikh women have been co-opted into patriarchy, that is, how Sikh women have become the transmitters of patriarchal violence. This was the first time that such violence was portrayed on film, even though the subject of violence towards Sikh women from within their communities has been in the media since 2004 when it was publicly exposed in the play *Behzti (Dishonour)* by British playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, which I discuss in chapter 4. Mehta's film is important to analyze because she has visually shown three generations of Sikh women living in Canada who are powerless within their household.

Throughout the film, Chand must obey her mother-in-law and her husband. As the wife in the Brampton household, she must follow her mother-in-law's directions or suffer the punishment. For example, in one scene, Chand does not roll out the circular rotis properly and Maji, her mother-in-law, verbally and physically abuses her. Chand attempts to defend herself and pushes Maji away from her and Maji falls to the floor and calls out to her son for help. When Rocky enters the kitchen, Maji tells him that his wife has pushed her. Rocky gives his mother permission to beat Chand's legs with a rolling pin. However, Maji fires back, "She is your wife," at which point Rocky slaps Chand and pushes her to the ground and proceeds to kick her in the stomach. The two young children Kabir and Loveleen watch the abuse along with Papji. Papji stops the abuse and Rocky leaves the house. Kabir helps Chand to her bedroom and pushes her onto the bed. Papji asks Maji, "Are you happy?" The next day her sister-in-law Aman tells Chand to ask Maji for forgiveness. In this scene we see the range of abuses, including how women are upholding patriarchy and how the mother and the sister-in-law do not question their



power over Chand, a telling sign because of how women are used as the tools of patriarchy to reinforce codes of oppression. For example, Chand's mother-in-law maintains her position and power within the household by enforcing and supporting Rocky's violence towards Chand. Through this negative portrayal of Sikh men, which is where I thought controversy would follow, Mehta has given an image and a voice to the brutal truth of the violence and oppression in many Sikh households. Yet in the film she also makes clear the role that women can play in sustaining this violence. Chand's mother-in-law allows her son to beat her daughter-in-law. Maji is the matriarch of the Canadian Sikh family and no one in the family disobeys or argues with her.

The Sikh matriarch is a character that is known by the Sikh women in her community. When my mother and her friends watched the film, my mother explained that after the film they shared their mother-in-law horror stories with one another. Questions that are raised for me are: will my mom and her friends continue the cycle, or has the film cause them to think about how they might change? This idea links back to the empowerment of women: the cycle of abuse is difficult to tease out, but with this film, Mehta focuses on how women are part of the patriarchal cycle. In *Culturally Driven Violence Against Women*, Papp addresses what she calls the "pecking order" of "women-on-women violence" in South Asian women's families. Papp candidly explains that the "newest bride in the family is the weakest member of the family. She is constantly at the disposal of her mother-in-law, whose aim is to establish her control over the newcomer. . .in particular the mother-in-law is sanctioned by cultural codes and submitted to without protest by younger women of lesser stature" (15). When the sister-in-law demands that

Chand should apologize to her mother-in-law, we can see how women participate in the pecking order of power within the household. As Kamala Nayar concludes in *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver*, older Sikh women, “upon becoming a mother-in-law,” know it is their turn to “enjoy the respect and decision-making power within the household” because they “feel that they have paid their dues as daughters-in-law, and now it is their turn to experience the respect and services as a wise elder” (257). In Mehta’s film, the mother-in-law, the sister-in-law and the daughter are all being used and abused within the household. But the only one among them with any power is the mother-in-law, and she will not give up that power even if it is used to govern other women.

In the final scene of *Heaven on Earth*, Chand has to prove to her husband and his family that she did not have a sexual affair with the daytime tenant. At this point, Chand is advised by her “imaginary” husband to take the snake test. Let me pause here for a moment and explain how Chand’s invention or replacement of a loving husband is crucial to her survival. She creates an alternate image of a husband that can love and support her in Canada. It is her invention that saves her from Rocky’s abuse and provides her with strength to leave the household. Returning to the moment just before the conclusion of the film, when Chand is outside in the backyard, she places her hand in the cobra pit and pulls out a magnificent snake. She wraps the snake around her, and speaks the truth; therefore, the cobra does not bite her. The truth she tells is that while she has been in Canada, only two men have touched her: her husband and the snake, in the form of a man or, in other words, the “Rocky of her desires.” What is enacted is an Indian folktale in which the wife has to put her hand in the snake pit and pull out the cobra

without getting bitten in order to prove that she is telling the truth. When Chand guides her hand into the pit she does not have time to rethink and re-examine her life. She is in survival mode.

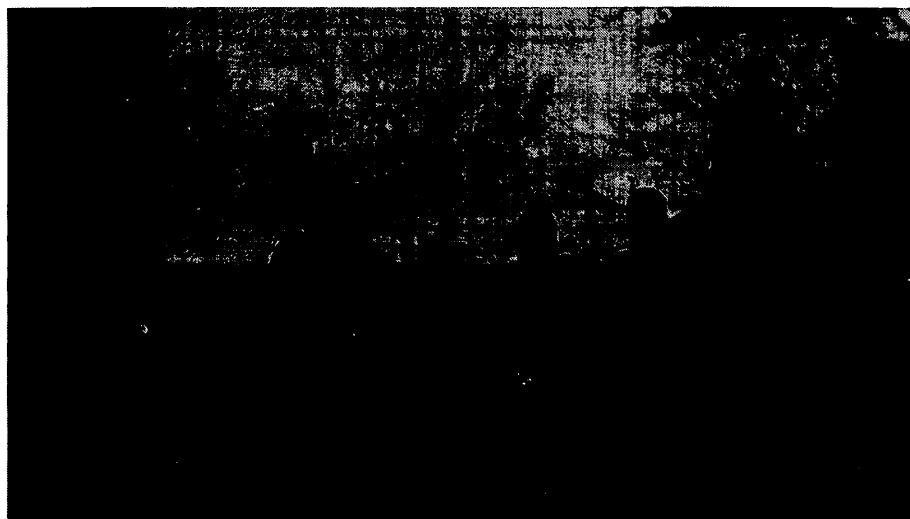


Figure 3.5. Chand approaching the snake pit from *Heaven on Earth*. DVD still.

Since Himani Bannerji's influential text *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*, there have been studies and town halls on violence against women within many communities. Bannerji critiques the concept of community and what it means to be part of a non-white community in Canada and how "religion" and "culture" have been equated. As a result, she writes, "[p]atriarchal social violence is thus daily and spiritually normalized in these walled towns of communities or religious and cultural ghettos" (164). Within the domestic sphere, violence is almost always aimed towards women and children at the hands of the men in the household. Bannerji demands that her readers, especially those who are women of colour, break the

silence and “speak to the nature of patriarchal violence within the terrain of our domestic lives” (153). That is precisely what Deepa Mehta has done: she has broken the silence by presenting a sincere account of the patriarchal violence within a Sikh household. She has also broken the silence around the ghettoization of Sikh immigrants in Canada. For example, in the film, the family rents out their home during the day in order to live the “Canadian dream.” Each morning, the grandparents have to leave their house and go to the mall for the day so that the daytime renters can use their beds to sleep.

She has broken the silence around the role of patriarchy in religion and its effect on women, and how they have been co-opted into patriarchal violence in order to maintain any sense of their own status and position within the household. The only way to gain power is to pick on the weakest link on the domestic ladder. The violence on the screen is hard to ignore. When I watched the film, I was tense and my fingers gripped the sides of the movie theatre seat each time Rocky and Chand were in a scene together. In the final scene, Chand searches for money and her passport and, as she is collecting these items from her dresser, she looks up and in the mirror she see the cobra behind her, but when she turns around, she see that it is the Rocky of her desires. She blesses Rocky and informs him that she is leaving. When the other Rocky knocks on the door, he asks her who she’s talking to and Chand replies, “Not to you.” With that she walks past him and the film ends with a close-up of Rocky’s face in black and white while he listens to Chand’s footsteps recede and then hears a door slam. When Chand walks out the front door at the end of the film, she is breaking the silence and the shame of leaving. We do not know what Chand does after she leaves the house; most likely she goes to her friend

Rose's house. Whatever her next move, through Chand Mehta has visually articulated that Sikh women have the power to leave abusive households if they want to find self-respect and gain agency and control over their own lives. A new image is being promoted here, that is, the image of a Sikh woman leaving her abusive household.

There is one other aspect of Mehta's film that I wish to address, and that is its magic realism elements. The religious folktales take on a life of their own. At work, Chand befriends a Jamaican woman named Rose, who fuels Chand's mythical world and gives her a love root to help her situation with Rocky. However, the love root fails and she is accused of trying to poison Rocky. Chand tries again to give some of the root to her husband. She grinds it up and puts it into some milk, but the milk turns red and starts to fizz, so Chand runs outside with the milk and throws it in the backyard into a hole in the ground. For the third time, Chand is beaten up by Rocky and she is unable to go to work. When Chand is alone, she imagines Rocky to be a wonderful and caring husband. Her internal mythical life is so real that she tells the daytime tenants, who hear her speaking to someone behind the closed door of her bedroom, that she is fine and her husband is with her. Chand's two worlds blend together, and she finds it difficult to let go of her magical world that includes the Rocky she desires. At the conclusion, of the film she confuses the real Rocky with her magical Rocky and she insists that the real Rocky was with her when the tenant knocked on their bedroom door. Rocky physically beats Chand and Loveleen witnesses the physical abuse while the rest of the family sit in the living room and listen, either unable or unwilling to intervene. While the violence is occurring, the whole family is listening to religious hymns from the Golden Temple.

Regardless of the magic realism elements of the cobra or love concoction from Rose, the myth is that Canada is a heavenly place to live. The image of the Sikh Canadian family is shattered as each scream from Chand washes over the religious hymns.

In *Heaven on Earth*, Mehta brings together elements of religion and feminist identity in the Sikh context. Chand's character is set against Canada, a country that is seen by many Indians as "heaven" because it is a place where they can build a better life for their families. What Mehta does in this film is show how "unheavenly" Canada is — the factory work, the feeling of isolation by every member in the family, the nature of the Sikh religion, the mixture of religion and cultural tales as truths. She breaks down the image of Canada and in turn builds up a new alternative image of the Sikh immigrant woman: a woman who is strong and capable and who knows her worth and value. At the beginning of the story, Chand is a believer, but she stops believing when her life depends on it; she stops trusting her own family back in India when she realizes that her father and brother have manipulated her. In the end, she regains her trust and confidence in herself. In the conclusion of the film, the image of a Sikh woman who does not know her rights, is submissive, duty bound and honour bound is shattered when Chand walks out the door.

Canadian director Deepa Mehta recreates the Sikh household and through the use of religious folktales and cultural narratives against the Canadian landscape reveals how women come to terms with an abusive marriage, household and country. The ending of the film reflects some of the realities for Sikh women in Canada. However, many women do not leave abusive households. A case in point is the public outcry that took place following the murder of Amandeep Kaur Dhillon at the hands of her father-in-law in

2009. He killed her because he claims that she was going to divorce his son and cause “dishonour” on the family. Paap has outlined the problem of violence for the last thirty years within Canada and she has documented that “since 2002, the murders of 12 women were identified as honour killings” (4) by the police. Coomaraswamy, Handa, Papp, Welchman and Hossain, have discussed the gendered violence and use of the term “honour.” by using cultural terms such as “izzat” only confuses the issues and does not solve the violence within the home. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) put together a town hall on the subject of family violence in South Asian Canadian communities within Ontario, which was rebroadcasted to the entire country a month after its original air date in Toronto. Many of the women self-identified as Punjabi and Sikh woman and shared their stories of being physically and mentally abused by older male relatives. The town hall addressed a number of issues and one was the idea of raising consciousness about family violence. Towards the end of the broadcast it was concluded that violence against women should be reported as such.

On the surface, Mehta’s film is a tool to raise consciousness about domestic abuse; however, she also breaks down the image of Canada as a “heavenly” place to live. The nation is cold and isolated, and what Mehta does in this film is show how “unheavenly” Canada is — the factory work, the feeling of isolation shared by every member in the family, the nature of the Sikhism that can be devoid of meaning in the diaspora. She breaks down the image of Canada and, in turn, builds up a new alternative image of the Sikh immigrant woman.

## Chapter Four

### Travails of *Izzat (Honour)*: Contemporary Plays by Gurpeet Kaur Bhatti

But sometimes I feel imprisoned by the mythology of the Sikh diaspora.

Gurpeet Kaur Bhatti, "Foreword," *Behzti (Dishonour)*

In December of 2004, I was in Brampton, Ontario, with my extended family.<sup>20</sup> We were sitting around the breakfast table, drinking chai and eating Indian snacks, and I was reading *The Globe and Mail*. The headline read: "Violent protest forces Sikh play cancellation" ("Violent"). As I read on, I realized that the playwright in question was a Sikh woman named Gurpeet Kaur Bhatti, and the article was about her play *Behzti*, which had opened in Birmingham. The next day at breakfast the headline read: "Threats force playwright into hiding in Britain" ("Threats"), and even though I had not read the play nor seen a production of it, I knew intuitively that Bhatti was attempting to tell a "truth" about the Sikh community. In the first half of this chapter, I concentrate my discussion on Bhatti's 2004 play *Behzti (Dishonour)* and research how Bhatti's critique of Sikhism, through a drama production, led to censorship. I analyze the playwright's intentions regarding the religious focus of the play, address the motivations of the attacks on the play and the playwright and review the defense of her work brought forth by the Sikh community itself as well as other communities in the UK. In the second half of this

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<sup>20</sup> The first part of this chapter was published in the *South Asian Review: Perspective on South Asian Women's Writing* in 2008.



chapter, I focus on Bhatti's 2010 play *Behud (Beyond Belief)*, which could be seen as a portrait of Bhatti's life during the controversy of the first play. In essence, the second play is presented as an internal reflection of how Bhatti, a Sikh woman, was struggling to share her story within a racist patriarchal culture. I consider how patriarchal violence has shaped Sikh women's identities and consider how Sikh women are resisting this violence and forming new identities and images for themselves and other Sikh women.

### **Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's Drama Production *Behzti (Dishonour)***

British playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti has published two plays and has worked on scripts for British television soap operas.<sup>21</sup> She self-identifies as a Sikh woman and promotes Asian storylines within her writing, and she has a history of writing work that pushes boundaries of British-Asian communities. Her first play, *Behsharam (Shameless)* (2001), centres on a dysfunctional British-Asian family. The play addresses the issues of drug abuse, prostitution, racial tensions and mental illness within the Sikh community. The play received mixed reviews from theatre critics; for example, a reviewer claimed "there were too many gaps where she [Bhatti] doesn't entirely get to grips with her subject matter." Nevertheless, supporters of her work called her "a promising writer" ("Profile"), and she was nominated for a Race in the Media Award in the radio music/entertainment category in 2003.

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<sup>21</sup> She has written scripts for the television soaps *Crossroads* and *Eastenders*. For both shows, she wrote narratives and characters that reflected "being" Asian in Britain.

The Birmingham Repertory Theatre (the REP) is where many new playwrights in the UK get their start. The theatre's mandate is the "commissioning and production of new work" and producing them is a way to "create new audiences for the work of the company." The REP produces "over twenty new productions each year." These productions are showcased in the theatre's main venue, The Door, whose mandate is to present the "world premieres of new plays from a new generation of British playwrights" (Birmingham Repertory Theatre). Bhatti's second play, *Behzti (Dishonour)* (2004), focused on the Sikh community and was a perfect fit for the REP's mandate.

*Behzti* is promoted as a "black comedy," and is located within a Sikh Gurdwara (the Sikh place of worship) in Birmingham. The lead characters are an aging mother named Balbir and her daughter Min, who attends a religious service at the Gurdwara. The mother wants to arrange a marriage for Min and asks the Gurdwara's organizing council to aid her in her search for a suitable husband. However, it becomes known that Balbir's late husband Tej has had a sexual affair with Sandhu, one of the male council members. Shortly after having the affair, Balbir's husband committed suicide. In a fit of grief, Sandhu rapes Min in his office (in the Gurdwara). When Balbir learns of the rape of her daughter and of other Sikh women, she kills Sandhu with a Kirpan.

In accordance with the REP's mandate, the goal was to draw a Sikh audience for Bhatti's play. The artistic director, Jonathan Church, met with Sikh community leaders to discuss the production. These meetings were an ongoing process from 2003 right up until the production in 2004. As a result, the Sikh community leaders demanded some fundamental changes to the script. For example, they wanted the rape scene relocated to a

non-sacred location, such as a community centre. Church and Bhatti, directors of the production, made minor changes but did not change the location of the rape scene. As agreed upon, by the REP producers and Sikh community leaders, the theatre passed out pamphlets to the audience that outlined the reasons for the protest by the community. In their opinion, the demand from the religious leaders was a form of artistic censorship; the talks then broke down and the production was mounted as scheduled. As a result, the Sikh community organized protests for December 9, 2004, outside the theatre during the first week of production. The protests were peaceful and only a handful of Sikhs were outside the theatre at this time. However, on December 18, 2004, as reported by the BBC, there were an estimated 400 Sikhs gathered in protest outside the REP; when the protest turned violent, the theatre had to be evacuated (BBC "Protest" 2004).

### **Close Reading/Viewing/Staging of the "Offensive" Scene**

In the foreword to the play, Bhatti explains: "I wrote *Behzti* because I passionately oppose injustice and hypocrisy. And because writing drama allows me to create characters, stories, a world in which I, as an artist, can play and entertain and generate debate" (*Behzti* 17). Bhatti understands as a writer that her work might cause offence, but she defends herself by insisting, "Perhaps those who are affronted by the menace of dialogue and discussion need to be offended" (*Behzti* 18).

The purpose of the rape scene and the use of the religious items such as the Kirpan, religious hymns and location is to show the hypocrisy of the Gurdwara's council and its "quest for power" (*Behzti* 17). It becomes important to know how these religious

items are used on stage. There are many stage directions that can be interpreted in different ways. Not having seen the 2004 production of the play and relying heavily on newspaper articles and the stage directions, I would agree that the religious items and location cannot be removed or changed. The structure of the play relies heavily on the idea that the Gurdwara is a communal location for the Sikh diaspora, which in real life is true for many of the older generation of Sikhs in Britain (Hall; Rait). Within Basran's novel and R. Gill's memoir set in Canada, the Gurdwara is removed from the overall narrative and points to a lack of religious instruction. Even in Mehta's film, Chand enters the Gurdwara only to get married. As well, the Gurdwara in the film is shown in pictures and on television and, as I have argued in the previous chapter, it becomes a symbol for patriarchal modes of behaviour. In Bhatti's play, she takes us to the Gurdwara and shines a spotlight on the Sikh women who enter this space.

In scene one of the play, "Gurdwara — Arrival," the stage directions indicate that the whole stage is being used but that it is divided into two areas: one is for Mr. Sandhu's office, and the other is for the Gurdwara:

*Hypnotic Sikh religious music plays. On a square area, defined by white sheets on the floor, sits one of the Gurdwara's priests, Giani Jaswant, 47, a pensive, heavy-hearted soul. He has a long black/grey beard and wears a blue turban and a white kurtha pajama. He holds a stick of horse hair. Giani Jaswant waves the stick about and gently chants to the music. (Behzti 47)*

It is unclear if the priest is sitting in front of the *Guru Granth Sahib* or sitting and chanting to the music without the holy book in front of him. Regardless, for me, the image is clear, having been raised as a Sikh and having been to many Sikh temples around the world, this is the central location of the play. To evoke another space with the same effect would be impossible. What Bhatti does here is open the doors to allow a window into a world that theatre-goers may or may not have seen. Ben Payne, the associate director (literary) of the REP, explained that some Sikh leaders argued that setting the scene in a Gurdwara was unacceptable, "Yet the argument that this setting had to be changed, whilst insisting this would not fundamentally change the meaning of the play was, to the theatre, equally unacceptable" (Payne n.p.). The image of the inside of the Gurdwara is an image we have seen in K. Gill's descriptive poem, where women are "falling asleep" and are too tired or disinterested to pay attention to the religious hymns being chanted in the Gurdwara. Bhatti employs the image on stage as a way to create an inner tension between the characters on stage and the audience.

The power of staging the "unacceptable" was shocking in 2004 and, I would argue, that if this play was produced again today, it would remain shocking to the Sikh community. But when I collectively gather all the images that Sikh women artists have been producing and compare them to this one, I do not find this scene shocking or unacceptable; rather, it is an image of a location demanding to be focused on, like the narrowing of a camera or the spotlight on a problem. The Gurdwara is a controlled space in which many of the congregants do not question the rituals nor feel they can suggest any changes. Here we see how religion normalizes cultural norms. In scene one, the

Gurdwara is the central space for the Sikh congregants, so to relocate the setting or remove it entirely is simply not possible.

Bhatti creates a complex and twisted web of relationships among all the characters: a homosexual affair between two Sikh men, and one's suicide because he cannot bear being revealed as a Sikh gay man; the male council member raping several women of the congregation; and the abusive relationship between the mother Balbir and her daughter Min. It is important to note that nowhere in the written play, stage directions or otherwise is any of the rape or the murder of Sandhu shown on stage. The associate director explains why the controversy is invalid:

...because much of the way the play has been described is inaccurate. Unless you regard kissing as particularly depraved, the play does not “depict scenes of sexual violence and depravity” — a phrase, which, with minor variations, has been passed around unquestioned in the media since. The rapist in the play is not a priest. A rape and a murder are a part of the plot but neither act is seen...[by the audience]. Nevertheless, it is important to be accurate if only to show that the playwright was never gratuitous. (Payne n.p.)

The difference between film and theatre is that film is always static, the images are fixed and the viewer can keep going back to the same image. With theatre productions, however, an audience does not see the same production that the audience saw the night before. It is the nature of theatre; it is a live event with actors on stage. The only way now is to review the play as literature. It is worth reproducing the scene in question to better

understand the complex issues at hand as well as to see how the staging in the play is addressed.

It is implied in the following scene that Min's father kills himself because Min witnesses a kiss between her father and Sandhu. Min has "forgotten" or repressed this memory because she does not want to be blamed by her mother for her father's suicide.

SANDHU: You remind me of him . . . you remind me of my Tej [Min's father]  
. . . he . . . he used to kiss me . . . on the lips . . . hard . . . so fucking hard . . .

MIN: (*Disturbed*) What?

SANDHU: You remember, don't you?

MIN: No . . .

SANDHU: But you saw us . . . together . . .

*MIN's getting distressed.*

MIN: Please stop . . .

SANDHU: I wasn't to blame. You watched, didn't you? When you were going round and round. Your eyes met mine. And his.

MIN: No.

SANDHU: He felt sick with himself for what you'd seen.

MIN: I didn't want to see. I didn't mean to.

*MIN's sobbing.*

SANDHU: Then he got on that train.

MIN: I know . . . I'm all criminal . . .

SANDHU: If you hadn't been there, he'd still be here. With me.

MIN: Please don't tell my mum.

SANDHU: There have been many lovers in my life . . . but none like my Tej . . . I loved him so fucking much . . . If only I could feel him, possess him . . . Just one more time . . . You've never been touched have you . . . there's been no physical contact . . .

MIN: Stop talking . . . please . . .

*She turns to exit. MR. SANDHU follows her.*

SANDHU: He was a fine man, such a nice person. Good to be around and spend time with . . . like you.

*Before MIN can head out, MR. SANDHU grabs her. She struggles.*

MIN: Get off me . . . get off . . . please get off . . .

*Her screams and shouts merge with the end of the Aardas (song) in the worship area. (Behzti 108–110)*

It seems to me that Sandhu can only hide his homosexuality by gaining power over women physically through raping them. The above scene is structured with the intention of “blacking out” the scene altogether. It demonstrates the power that a male council member, Sandhu, has over younger women. Sandhu understands that he is a religious authority with power inside the walls of the Gurdwara. He holds power over young girls and women because their bodies within the walls of the Gurdwara have become ritualized bodies that can be dominated. Bhatti presents how Sikh women and men have become somewhat unconscious of their actions. As Bell explains, “[r]itual may thus be the most powerful arena in which the processes of internalization and objectification can remain



relatively unconscious of themselves as such” (310). When Sandhu rapes Min, her “screams and shouts merge with the end of the Aardas (song) in the worship area.” The rape *is not* a Sikh religious ritual. Bhatti is demanding that the audience view the Gurdwara not only as a scared place but also as a space where Sikh men construct a religious environment in which they are at the centre of power. Therefore, Bhatti has questioned this religious space by suggesting that the Gurdwara is a sexually charged, violent and controlling environment. I want to make it clear that we do not physically see the rape on stage but only hear the religious music and Min’s screams. It is a disturbing scene that requires our attention, and it requires us to rethink our relationship to religious structures. That is what good art does; it asks us to re-examine and question what we know. From a feminist perspective, this production reaches into the lives and narratives from the margins; it is telling the stories that are not told out loud and certainly not shown on stage.

In the next scene, another congregant whose name is Teetee recounts how Sandhu raped her in his office in the Gurdwara. Teetee Parmar is a fifty-two-year-old “hard-faced but curvaceous women” (48). She narrates her story to Min’s mother. In the scene, Teetee reveals that her own mother watched as Sandhu raped her. The mothers are implicated in these rapes.

TEETEE: *(Flat)* Because he did it to me.

*Balbir takes this in. [Min’s mother]*

TEETEE: Right over there.

*TEETEE points to a corner.*

...

*TEETEE isn't listening. She points again. She speaks in a matter of fact fashion.*

TEETEE: They [TEETEE's mother] stripped me first and covered my mouth.

Then he bent me over and pulled my hair. He was young then so he had better control. Your Mr. Sandhu went inside me and took what was human out of my body. My mother wept salty tears while she watched. Afterwards she beat me till I could not feel my arms or legs. Then she turned to me and said, now you are a woman, a lady. Now you are on your own, *behsharam* [shameless]. (*Behzti* 125–126)

Teetee's mother watches because she feels she is powerless against Sandhu as she is physically unable to move. As we later learn, she too was raped and controlled by Sandhu. She watches in the same way that the mother-in-law and sister-in-law "listen" to Chand being beaten in Mehta's film *Heaven on Earth*. The point of these violent scenes is to show us, the viewer, that women cannot gain power within the walls of the Gurdwara or their homes. It's not enough to simply state it. Bhatti uses the theatre space to articulate the feeling of powerlessness that women feel within the Gurdwara. Bhatti stages such violence against women because it is the only way to make the theatre audience visualize the violence. As Mieke Bal argues, "Rape cannot be visualized because the experience is, physically as well as psychologically, [an] inner [experience]. . . In this sense, rape is by definition imagined" (100). Therefore, the rape is a type of "aftershock" and only occurs in the imagination of the audience. As Kim Solga affirms, "Rape can only be made real, be made to matter (made a legal or a social matter) at a

distance from the suffering body, as a carefully codified representation of an arguably inaccessible event” (3). By Bhatti not staging the rape, she taps into the imagination to make “real” the suffering of Sikh women’s bodies. A Sikh woman therefore “becomes visible as a body, and as a female body, only under some particular [male] gaze — including that of politics” (Riley 106). When she locates the suffering of Sikh women’s bodies within the Gurdwara, Bhatti codifies the Gurdwara as a negative space for women. Further, by Bhatti staging the scene twice, she is demanding that the audience imagine the rape taking place at centre stage even though the scene is blacked out. The sexual violence leads to murder (which is not directly staged), and at the conclusion of the play, Balbir and Min leave the Gurdwara. Bhatti again layers this scene with other issues such as the abusive mother–daughter relationship plus the abusive power that the Sikh leaders have over women.

#### *Responses by the Sikh Community in Britain*

Representatives of the Sikh community attacked the play on four points. Point one: Sikh community leaders denied that the events described in the play could ever have occurred in the Gurdwara. Sewa Singh Mandla, chairman of the UK Sikh Gurdwaras, adamantly claimed in the media: “The play depicts sexual abuse, homosexual activities, rape and murder. In real life, these things do not happen in Gurdwaras” (“Police Meeting” n.p.). I found the chairman’s adamant denial that these things did not and could not happen in the sacred space of the Gurdwara disturbing. How could he be so sure? I researched a bit further into sexual abuse cases in Sikh Gurdwaras and, when I did, I discovered that in 2005 three Sikh priests in Winnipeg, Manitoba, had been charged with

sexually assaulting a child. The assaults themselves date back to the 1990s when the victim was eight years old and while he had been living in the Gurdwara during the summers (“Three Priests” n.p.). The young boy-child had accused the priests of sexual abuse in Canada and in India.

While *Behzti* was not based on any real event, people within the community cannot assume that sexual abuse does not occur in the Gurdwara. Religious sacred spaces have power within the community and religion, but this does not mean that we within the community should not challenge, question or investigate issues of abuse within that space if we hear of such offences taking place. As a matter of fact, I would argue that because these religious spaces hold power within the community, we must be hyper-vigilant in maintaining a space that is transparent. I am reminded of the film *Maya*, directed by Digvijay Singh, which addresses *devadasim* — that is, the religiously sanctioned rape of girls, a practice in which girls are “married” to god and then raped repeatedly by priests within their temples.<sup>22</sup> The idea that “these things” do not happen within the Gurdwara is one topic of discussion that did not take place in the media reports. Because of the attacks on the theatre and on Bhatti, the larger issues that the play presents were overshadowed and the Sikh community disregarded the intentions of the theatre and of Bhatti. Temple Sikh leader Mohan Singh claimed that the community was “not bothered about rape scenes or pedophiles — we know that there are good and bad people from every

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<sup>22</sup> The Venkatasani and Jogini cults wherein girls are “married” to the god Yellama continue to be practised in parts of Andhra Pradesh. *Maya* is not based on any one real event; however, it is based on many stories told by women to the director and his producers.

background and religion . . . but the problem is having these things take place in a temple. Any religion would not take such a slur” (“Anger” n.p.).

The second point of their argument was that the Sikh community was a religious minority and as such was powerless to take any legal action against the play, unlike the religious majorities, such as the Catholic Church, that had both legal power and precedent to cancel, ban or denounce offensive plays. The British Catholic community took offence with the play and sided with the Sikh Gurdwara council and its leaders. Sikh leader Mohan Singh was quoted as saying: “When they’re [the theatre is] doing a play about a Sikh priest raping someone inside the Gurdwara, would any religion take it?” (“Theatre Stormed” n.p.). Singh was making a larger claim that Sikhs have a legal right in Britain to stand up for themselves and, by placing the play in the overall debate of religion and art, Mohan Singh was able to gain support from other religious institutions. For example, the Catholic Church came to the aid of the Sikh leaders by publicly supporting a boycott of the play. Further, Reverend Vincent Nichols voiced his own support for the Sikh community: “Such deliberate, even if fictional, violations of the sacred place of the Sikh religion demeans the sacred places of every religion” (“Theatre Stormed” n.p.). So, in other words, by claiming to be “powerless,” Singh was able to gain public support from other religious groups and gain power in order to shut down the production. The Catholic community was the only religious community to publicly support the Sikh leaders and their attack on the play and the theatre.

The third point on which the leadership based its attack was that the play promoted a misunderstanding of the Sikh religion and its followers. Again the temple

leader, Mohan Singh, pointed out how deeply the community feared that “people out there who don’t know anything about Sikhs will see this and what sort of picture will they have in their minds? They will paint all the Sikhs with the same brush” (“Anger” n.p.). Knowing that the current British government was attempting to create a Racial and Religious Hatred Bill (2005), which would make religious hatred a criminal offence, the Sikh community appealed to the British government to put a stop to the play. However, the government did not take a stand in favour of the leaders. Instead, a few MPs spoke out in support of the theatre. Member of Parliament Estelle Morris supported the REP and praised its handling of a “very sensitive situation,” but said it is “a very sad day for freedom of speech” (Carmichael A17). Dr. E. Harris, a Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament, stated that protests against the play were “exacerbated and . . . it is vital for free speech and the future of our creative arts that this production is not closed on the basis of protests or intense lobbying” (“Police” n.p. ).

In the fourth point, the Sikh community condoned the violence and the personal threats that were being made against Bhatti. The threats started as phone threats of abduction and murder (Branigan and Dodd). As Bhatti describes in her letter, “The West midlands police informed me there had been threats to my life, and I left home to go into hiding. I was assigned two police officers, and came home weeks later to find CCTV installed outside my flat and security railing over my window” (“Back to *Behzti*” n.p.). Back in 2004 the Sikh leaders had concurred that the threats were being made because the playwright and the theatre refused to compromise. The media reported that the Sikh community “extended an olive branch to the controversial playwright Gurpreet Bhatti

pleading with her to hold further talks to ensure her axed show goes on” (Bassey 17). It is interesting to note that the manipulation which was intended to be seen as extending an “olive branch” occurred after Bhatti received death threats and went into hiding. Bhatti refused to change the location of the play and refused to continue negotiating with the Sikh religious leaders. The leaders continued to demand that she prove “these things” had happened in the Gurdwara. In the *Sunday Mercury* (a local newspaper), Sukhwinder Singh, a Sikh himself and a member of the Birmingham-based Sikh Federation, argued,

We are not a bunch of backward medievalists who hand out fatwas on anyone who offends us. If Ms. Bhatti really has the courage of her convictions then she should stand up and defend her work publicly and we would admire her for that.

But hiding away like this, she is not helping herself or the situation. (Bassey 17)

Not only did Bhatti receive death threats, but also her intentions and courage came under attack once she went into hiding. The Sikh community did its best to paint Bhatti as a cowardly artist who would not defend her work. In the end, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre pulled the production because it could not protect its actors or the audience members over the length of its three-week run. Within the media reports, the Sikh religious leaders claimed “victory,” because the play was cancelled and “common sense” had prevailed.

### **Censorship with Literary Evaluation**

The attacks by the Sikh community leaders did not address the literary merit of the play or the issues that Bhatti had raised; rather, they attempted to shut down the

production because their demands to relocate the rape scene were not met by the playwright or the theatre. The Sikh leaders stated repeatedly that the play was offensive and should not be staged based on their knowledge of that one scene. Within media reports, there was insufficient critical assessment of the play by the Sikh community or others. One criticism about the play was made by Sukhwinder Singh, who stated on the BBC News, “Even independent reviewers of the play have struggled to fathom why it was in a Sikh temple, as it adds nothing to it apart from making it controversial” (Bassey 17). I went in search of these “independent reviewers” and only found a mention of a review in the BBC’s “Profile: Playwright Gurpeet Kaur Bhatti.” The author praised the first part of the production, but then wrote, “Once the story moved into the temple, the play suddenly loses its subtlety and becomes a bloodbath . . . . She clearly has great dramatic skill, creating some lovely moments of tension and some highly memorable characters . . . but in many ways these talents are wasted as the tale disappears into mayhem” (“Profile” n.p. ). It is unclear if Singh was referring to this review. Since the production run was cancelled, there was no other opportunity for literary or public criticism.

The cancellation of the production had many artists defending the playwright, the theatre and the right to freedom of expression. Bhatti released a letter in her defense that was published in *The Guardian* and entitled “This Warrior Is Fighting On.”<sup>23</sup> In the letter, she positioned herself as a Sikh and, in fact, as a Sikh warrior who addressed her heritage

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<sup>23</sup> Since publishing this defense, Bhatti has kept a very low profile in Britain. She has travelled around the world to give readings from the play. As of yet, there are no plans to restage the play.



by stating: “Our ancestors were warriors with the finest minds who championed principles of equality and selflessness. I am proud to come from these remarkable people” (2). She expressed her anger towards the death threats but did not accuse the Sikh community or its members. She wrote that she understood the REP’s position to stop the production due to safety concerns. In addition, she defended her right as a “human being” and her “role as a writer to think, create and challenge” her community. She argued that the “theatre is not necessarily a cosy space, designed to make us feel good about ourselves. It is a place where the most basic human expression — that of the imagination — must be allowed to flourish” (5). The defense for imagination, of course, leads to a defense of freedom of speech. She does not attempt to defend her work on foundations of “truth” but rather repositioned her defense so she could discuss artistic freedom.

Stuart Rogers, executive director of the REP, defended the play and the theatre’s decision to stage the play because Bhatti is a Sikh and “it doesn’t offend her, it doesn’t offend the young actors who are in it or the young Sikhs who come to see it” (“Police” n.p). Rogers suggested that there was a generational gap between the Sikh youth and their religious leaders who were protesting the play.

Gurharpal Singh, a professor of inter-religious relations at Birmingham University, wrote an article entitled “Sikhs Are the Real Losers from *Behzti*” about the cancellation of the play in *The Guardian* in December 2004. In a later article (“British Multiculturalism and Sikhs”), he wrote that he received seventy-eight email messages from young Sikhs supporting Bhatti’s right to stage the play. Singh explained that for many young Sikhs the idea of speaking out against their elders within the community or

the Sikh leaders from the Gurdwara could have had negative repercussions. Further, many young Sikhs were not offended by the production but rather saw the production as a way to discuss issues that were usually not addressed. Within the Sikh community, Singh argued, there tended to be a lack of tolerance for issues that directly commented on the Sikh religion. For this reason, the Sikh community in general was unable to analyze a play that critiqued the Sikh religion. Furthermore, many Sikhs seemed to be unwilling to confront issues of sexuality. If the elders in the community were unable to address issues that affect the younger Sikh generation, how could the younger Sikhs voice their issues? By ignoring these issues, the elders were silencing the younger generation, which was another layer of censorship.

When the play was cancelled, a number of organizations publicly defended Bhatti and her work on the grounds of freedom of speech.<sup>24</sup> Salman Rushdie, a member of the writers' organization PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists), defended Bhatti's work and suggested that artists

may need to fight the battle for the Enlightenment all over again. That

battle. . . was about the church's desire to place limits on thought.

Diderot's novel *La Religieuse*, with its portrayal of nuns and their

behavior, was deliberately blasphemous: It challenged religious authority,

with its indexes and inquisitions, on what was possible to say. Most of

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<sup>24</sup> A few of the defending organizations were PEN, the National Secular Society, Sampad (Birmingham-based and nationally respected South Asian arts organization) and the Birmingham Women's Collective. Artists signed an open letter defending free expression. The letter, with a full list of signatories, can be found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/news/story/0,11711,1378818,00.html>.

our contemporary ideas about freedom of speech and imagination come from the Enlightenment. But although we may have thought the battle long since won, if we aren't careful, it is about to be "un-won."

("Democracy" n.p. )

The battle between the Sikh religious authority and the artistic community came to a halt, and there has been no further dialogue between the community and the theatre. A few months after the protest against Bhatti's play, the Evangelical Christians in the UK used similar tactics to protest the BBC's screening of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. The Sikh protest set a precedent for other religious groups that wanted to silence artistic productions. *The Opera* was aired over two Saturdays in January 2005 ("Group").

Rushdie raised the idea that artists were at battle with religious organizations, but he also pointed out how artists within Britain were battling the British government because it was attempting to pass a Racial and Religious Hatred Bill that would allow the government to charge people, including artists, with inciting "racial or religious hatred." The bill had caused much controversy and protesters were lobbying the government to remove it. The government claimed that the legislation was a response to the concerns of faith groups and that was designed to protect them. However, in 2006 the British bill did not pass. If this bill had been law in 2004, the government could have shut down Bhatti's production because the Sikh community took offence, thus blurring the lines between Church and State.

Women's organizations also defended the play. Hannana Siddiqui, a member of the Southall Black Sisters, suggested that oppression of women's artistic work leads to

censorship and supports a patriarchal agenda. Furthermore, she insisted: “We know of women who have been raped by religious leaders — we don’t know if it has, but it is possible that it has happened in a temple, church or mosque” (Anushka 15). Patriarchy has been one of the root causes of silence around sexual violence towards women.<sup>25</sup>

Hanne Stinson, the executive director of the British Humanist Association, stated: “A Sikh woman writes a play popular with young Sikh women, perhaps because the issues it raises are important for them. Other Sikhs, nearly all male, protest violently outside the theatre, claiming the play is offensive”<sup>26</sup> (King et al. 21). So, were these violent protests about an insult to strongly held religious beliefs? Or were they about suppressing dissident voices, especially women’s voices, within the Sikh community? It is all too easy to assume that faith communities are homogenous and to forget that religious and community leaders, mostly male, may not be speaking for the whole community.

Because of the public nature of the protest, even if Sikh women wanted to protest, they would not because they were not involved in the management of the Gurdwaras. Satwant Kaur Rait affirms that Sikh women “cannot come forward and participate in management structures especially in areas of direct concern and relevance to women and children” (51). Bhatti’s work directly connects to the issues that Sikh women and the

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<sup>25</sup> In one study, women gave the following reasons for not reporting incidents of sexual assault: Belief that the police could do nothing about it (50%), concern about the attitude of both police and the courts towards sexual assault (44%), fear of another assault by the offender (33%) and fear and shame (64%). Women who have been sexually assaulted often fear that if they report a sexual assault they will be re-victimized by the justice system (Solicitor General of Canada).

<sup>26</sup> The three people arrested were Sikh men.

younger Sikh generation face. In spite of women and men being equal within the Sikh religion, the lived reality is vastly different. As Rait points out, “Many young Sikh women express their frustration and confusion at the hypocrisy in the Sikh community about the subjugation of women” (52). Rait has done an ethnographic study on Sikh women, and she lists the various ways by which Sikh women in the diaspora are controlled:

Women are put under many social and cultural restraints and their movements are closely watched. Women are also discouraged from interacting with the opposite sex. Even sitting next to brothers, cousins and uncles is often disapproved of. A woman should not look into a man’s eyes, nor raise her head at her elders. She should never argue with her husband or his family. A woman should not defend herself even if she is right. Such restraints are expected only of women, not men. Inevitably, they rob women of their strength and power and cramp their personality. *Laaj* (honour), *sharam* (shyness) and *izzat* (family prestige) are the words used for women’s chastity, family prestige and honour. These are considered to be a woman’s *shingar* (ornaments) and she should not lose them at any cost. Their actions can damage family *izzat* whilst men’s actions are not considered damaging at all. (53)

In essence, Bhatti presents these issues within her play. In the foreword of the play, Bhatti asserts: “Only by challenging fixed ideas of correct and incorrect behaviour can institutionalized hypocrisy be broken down” (*Behzti* 17). In my mind, Bhatti is telling a

“truth” about the Sikh community, and I can understand that this truth is difficult to imagine, difficult to watch and difficult to understand for the community. However, the theatre space is an excellent space to begin discussion because one can visually see how the silencing and the control of Sikh women can take place.

One of the strongest defenses for artistic freedom and for condemning the violence from the Sikh community came from author and playwright Hanif Kureishi. In an online article he argued, “The Sikh community should be ashamed of the fact that it is destroying theatres. Destroying a theatre is like destroying a temple. Without our culture, we are nothing. Our culture is as crucial to the liberal community as temples are to the religious community” (“Birmingham Theatre” 1–2). The idea that the theatre is a type of temple equates the Sikh Gurdwara with the theatre and in turn disrupts the British Sikh community’s argument that the theatre is a “godless institution” (“Birmingham Theatre” 1–2). Rather, the theatre came to embody an aspect of religiosity. If the Sikh community could hold up the Gurdwara as a “gateway to the Guru,” and if the Guru is defined as God, then artists can argue that the theatre is a “gateway to culture.” Rushdie praised Kureishi for his comment and added: “If we cannot have open discourse about the ideas by which we live, then we are straitjacketing ourselves” (“Rushdie Attacks” n.p.). In their defense of Bhatti’s work, both Rushdie and Kureishi addressed issues of freedom of speech and freedom of cultural and religious critique. In 2005, Bhatti was awarded with the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, which was created to encourage women playwrights (Jury). By publicly giving this award to Bhatti, the artistic and feminist communities

aligned and positioned themselves to speak for the rights of freedom and cultural expression.

The Sikh community's "mob-rule" approach, whether intended or not, was successful in shutting down Bhatti's play. Those who protested did not justify their attacks in thoughtful literary critiques; instead, they felt offended by its content and seemed to think that this was a legitimate reason to ban the production. If the British government had passed the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill that was intended to uphold "tolerance," it would have, in fact, done the opposite and promoted a type of narrow-mindedness that would not allow for open discussion. In contrast, artists such as novelists, playwrights and actors supported their right to promote dialogue within their communities even if the works they create offend some viewers. The depiction of religious space (either as desacralized or not) results in questions around ritual spaces and practices. The message that is sent to artists is that their life could be on the line just by using religious spaces in their artistic work.

### **Portrait of a Sikh Woman Artist in *Behud* (*Beyond Belief*)**

In March of 2010 Bhatti plunged back into the theatre scene and mounted *Behud* (*Beyond Belief*) at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry. *Behud* engages in the controversy concerning the 2004 play *Behzti* by fictionalizing the production within the new play. It is Bhatti's personal reaction to the protest against the play, as she explains:

Everything I feel about that time is in *Behud* — from my own self-doubt and self-loathing to institutional racism and the friction between artist and state — and

ultimately the triumph of the imagination. But I also wanted the play to be able to stand alone, without the specter of *Behzti* behind it. ("Back to *Behzti*" n.p.)

It is difficult to read *Behud* as a "stand-alone" play because of the close connections to the public outcry she experienced in *Behzti*. *Behud*, then, is an autobiographical account of Bhatti's life as it unfolded in 2004.

In *Behud*, Bhatti creates the character Tarlochan Kaur Grewal, who represents the thoughts and feelings of Bhatti. In this new play, Bhatti renames the original play from *Behzti* to *Gund (Dirt)*. Tarlochan is writing the play on the stage and is interacting with the characters she creates. The play has a surrealist element where Tarlochan sees herself as a puppet master writing *Gund* while trying to control the characters on stage. Khush, a young Sikh male, and Mr. Sidhu, an elderly man in a turban, attempt to shoot Tarlochan by the end of play, at which point Tarlochan is in the middle of the controversy and is dealing with the outburst from the Sikh community. *Behud* is structured as a play-within-a-play, which allows us as the reader to follow the inner thoughts of the artist as she is writing and creating the production.

In the stage directions for scene one, Khush has finished painting a sign that will be the backdrop for the play and that reads "SHAME ON SIKH PLAYWRIGHT FOR HER CORRUPT IMAGINATION" (*Behud* 36), Mr. Sidhu is praising Khush for the banner, and Tarlochan is trying to direct Khush and Mr. Sidhu. As the play progresses, however, Tarlochan loses control of her characters. The two other male characters are DCI Vincent (Vince) Harris, a white man who is the head of the Community Safety Unit, and DI Gurpal (Gary) Singh Mangat, who is part of the same unit and is of Sikh-Punjabi



descent. These two police officers are supposed to “protect” Tarlochan from the Sikh community and from the media. However, Vince is bluntly racist, and as Tarlochan continues to write the drama on stage, she constantly threatens to pull Vince from the production. Vince asks Gary in the prologue, “By protecting Miss Grewal and making sure the show goes on we’ll be giving her play a leg-up. I mean that’s the whole point of living in England, isn’t it?” (*Behud* 31). Bhatti feels it necessary to support the right of free speech but she wants people to examine the speech they use in their own lives. The “whole point of living in England” becomes central to the production. Vince represents free speech that lapses into racist speech:

VINCE: “Do you really think that brown rabble out there will respond to  
you?”

GARY: I don’t appreciate that comment! (54)

Tarlochan insists that Vince “do what she wants” him to do on the stage; nevertheless, these racist slippages occur when Tarlochan least expects it. She attempts to navigate the stage like a puppet master but fails because Vince and the other male characters don’t do “what she wants” them to do; rather, patriarchal control finds its way onto the stage under the guise of Vince simply “doing his job.” It is not simply a British white patriarchy that Tarlochan is fighting against; it is also the cultural patriarchy of the Sikh community. Amrik is an older Sikh man who does not agree with Tarlochan. Amrik’s aim is to convince Tarlochan to give up the production and “return” to the Sikh community. In this scene, Amrik tries to explain to Khush why killing Tarlochan is necessary:

AMIRK: You know we as a community are our own worst enemies.

KHUSH: How do you mean?

AMIRK: Reading their newspapers, eating their food, sleeping with their women. I tried all that. Learned my lesson. They don't mind us living here but they don't want us taking part. It's easier if you're a woman, like Tarlochan. The Goreh [white people] feel sorry for you. If you're a man, you're the oppressor. Truth is they're frightened of us. And jealous. They crave the power our culture gives to our sex. So they're on a mission to emasculate us.

Bhatti is trying to include all the perspectives that were expressed when the first play was attacked and she uses the subject position of Tarlochan as a woman artist at the centre of the conflict between the two types of patriarchal structures to do so.

*Behud* received lukewarm reviews. Kate Kellaway of *The Observer* recognized that Bhatti's "gag has been removed with a flourish"; however, the "trouble with *Behud* . . . is its potential in authenticity" ("*Behud*" n.p.). Kellaway also found the main character to be too reflective and at times lapsing into self-pity. While we have not yet seen a production or narrative that is overtly self-reflective from Sikh women artists, in *Behud* we have a new voice — one that may be unsure of herself but one that still holds true to her vision of art and life.

When it was staged in 2010, six years after *Behzti*, *Behud* met with little protest. While the theatre received a few protest letters from Sikh leaders about the production of the new play, the Sikh community did not react with street violence or attacks on the

theatre. Instead, very few people from the Sikh community attended any of the performances. Bhatti explains:

In the end, while audience numbers were lower than we'd hoped for — some people said that the Asian community in Coventry didn't even know the play was on — I was heartened by the feedback. It was great to hear the muffled laughter of one of the Sikh men who came to see the play in previews, part of a group of community leaders who had expressed their concerns to the theatre. Whether he was laughing with or at the play, it at least elicited some kind of reaction. The important thing for me is that *Behud* was produced, and now the published text is out there for anyone who's interested. The play, production and marketing were by no means perfect, but they were heartfelt. And the fact that they happened at all is a step in the right direction. (“Back to *Behzti*” n.p.)

Although she successfully published the content of the play, Bhatti was still afraid even six years after the first play was written. In 2010, she was still concerned for her life because of the public violence that occurred in 2004. Another safety precaution she took was to not be photographed for any of the play's promotional materials. Instead, the actor Chetna Pandya, who plays Tarlochan, is the play's public image. According to Alfred Hickling of *The Guardian*, who interviewed the playwright, Bhatti “prefers not to be photographed because she and her family are still considered at risk” (“Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti:” n.p.). In the new play, a gun that is placed in the hands of all the characters throughout the play represents the violence against Tarlochan. At the end of the play,

Amrik shoots Tarlochan but fails to kill her. When Hickling asked Bhatti what would happen if her “return to the public eye reignite[d] the hostility,” Bhatti’s answer was not surprising given her courage and strength to write, produce and continue her vision of her artwork:

At least this time I'll be better prepared. I remember coming face-to-face with one of the demonstrators in the foyer, an elderly gentleman, who said to me, “When I see your name up there on the posters, it makes me so proud.” I'm part of the community, and they're part of me. But I put myself in the firing line, and it looks as if that's where I'm staying.

(Hickling “Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti:” n.p.)

She stands firm in her vision and her connection to the Sikh community. She makes it clear that the community will not stop her from writing and mounting productions. In the final scene of the play, the stage “transform[s] into a sea of scripts” (*Behud* 107), and as Khush reads from the scripts, the play begins again with Tarlochan getting up and starting to write. It is this closing image that promotes a strong portrayal of women artists. In order to dismantle the patriarchal culture, Sikh women artists like Bhatti are still required to put themselves “in the firing line” while preserving their connection to the Sikh community.

Sikh women artists are caught between religious and cultural oppressions.

Collectively, the texts that I address in this dissertation focus on how Sikh women are struggling to be heard within their religious and cultural communities. In *Behud*, three burdens for Sikh women are presented; one that they have the burden to respond to the



surrounding racist society that feels its voice is being threatened. Second, women artists have to respond to racist attacks in order to protect their voices and right to express their realities in this racist society and third, the patriarchal oppression and the sexism that Sikh women have to face within the religious community and the society at large. The theme of “protection”, freedom of speech and patriarchal oppression, are the main elements in Bhatt’s second play.

### **Conclusion**

These autobiographical accounts, either through plays, poetry, film or other forms of cultural productions, are very complex narratives. These artists are creating an alternative world in order to reach out to their surrounding communities. Unlike films, which can be viewed in the privacy of a woman’s home, Bhatti’s plays have to have a live audience in the theatre in order to achieve the full effect of her productions. When reading plays, it takes a certain amount of contextual knowledge that can be lost in translation. The point I am making here is that these artists are creating the first global canon of cultural texts that address the life stories of globalized Sikh women. These gendered narratives focus the audience, either individually, collectively or globally, on the issue of Sikhism and what in fact marks us (yes, I am including myself) as Sikh and as women. The locality of each of these cultural productions suggests to me that Sikh women are struggling, no matter the nation, to remove the religious constraints and remove the barriers that the nation may impose such as racism or immigration.

I use Sikh religious spaces and symbols within my own creative writing, and I am highly aware of the reaction I could receive from my community. As an artist, I grapple with how best to present my work but still stay true to my own vision of the project. In 2008 I was asked to read at the Ottawa Sikh Youth Association whose theme was “Women and Sikhi: A Practical, Theological and Realistic Look at Women’s Role in Sikhism.” Just before going on stage, an older Sikh man from the Ottawa Sikh community asked me not to “read anything too religious or too political.” I questioned him and asked him to clarify, but he only repeated his position again and I said nothing. In this moment I felt silenced. However, I made the choice not to listen to his request, and I went on stage and read. My poems are rooted in the personal, the religious and the political, and in that moment I stayed true to my words. I received compliments from the audience (young and old, men and women from within the community), and many people were surprised that they enjoyed the poetry. The Sikh community may not want to see its “dirty laundry” on stage; however, as artists it is our job to push the boundaries and open up the discussion. We artists need to remind the community that art is a medium in which we can express ideas, as difficult as they may be. Further, women’s groups claim that the Sikh community is a patriarchal community, and they express a concern with silencing Sikh women’s voices and lives. I have expressed this in my own personal example above. Promotional material for Bhatti’s play raised the same question: “In a community where public honour is paramount, is there any room for the truth?” (*Behzti* 17). The attack on *Behzti* and the artist herself emphasized how the Sikh community upheld the notion of public honour and how its narrow view silenced Sikh women’s voices and experiences.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the very public space of the theatre and the way in which the Sikhs in England behaved has allowed me to open up a space for conversations about abuse among Canadian women artists. Since 2004, the Sikh community in Canada has been on display many times, due to the violence against and the murders of young Sikh brides. The artistic community has responded with relatively few productions, whether that would include film, novels or poetry. I would suggest that the ongoing patriarchy within the Sikh community still is an issue that is not fully addressed. Sikh women who attempt to address these issues become fearful because of the violence that can occur when speaking out. While the first three chapters have looked at women artists' expressions of Sikh identity through poetry, fiction, memoir, film and theatre, the next chapter looks at women who are attempting to strengthen their Sikh identity through the religious practice of wearing the turban. However, by wearing turbans, these women are inadvertently supporting patriarchal culture, in other words, that same culture that was so aggressively expressed in the protests against Bhatti's work.



## Chapter Five

### Turban, Facial Hair, and Cleavage

Like veiling, turbaning generates anxiety in the observer, the sense of inaccessibility, of something being out of place and out of time, of incomprehensibility.

Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*

I have seen prepubescent girls wearing a tightly wrapped scarf around their head atop a long skirt, holding hands with their similarly attired mothers. I do not have a daughter, but the sight of these young girls stirs feelings in me that disturb me as a woman and an intellectual.

Marnia Lazreg, *Questioning the Veil*

In the first quote above from the 2007 text *Terrorist Assemblages*:

*Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir K. Puar connects the veil that some Muslim women wear with the turban that some Sikh men wear and elaborates on how they converge. However, Puar does not address the turban that some Sikh women wear and how they might fit into creating this “anxiety in the observer.” In the second epigraph, Marnia Lazreg addresses her anxieties or the disturbance she feels when looking at young veiled Muslim girls with their mothers who are veiled as well; that similar feeling of disturbance stirs within me when I view photographs of young girls wearing turbans and when I sometimes see young girls wearing turbans with chunnis covering them. As the observer, I experience an undercurrent of incomprehensibility as well as an intellectual disturbance. In previous chapters, I have suggested that Sikh women are sharing their life narratives through literature, film and theatre production and so far we have seen in these

various art forms very little religious instruction about the Gurdwara space as a conflicted space that does not allow women the freedom to worship or connect with other women. In this chapter, I examine the complex gendered politics of Sikh women donning turbans through various images that have emerged over the course of writing this dissertation. In the introduction of this dissertation, I noted that within Sikhism, over time the turban has come to represent “for Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike the symbol of Sikh identity” (Nesbitt 297). It is difficult to separate the turban and Sikhism and whether the Sikh identity should be tied up with the turban is a question that is implicit here. But because the turban has been seen as a male religious symbol, when Sikh women don turbans, it is seen as a choice; I do not examine this choice of women wearing turbans but rather I examine the image that is being captured through a lens of feminist politics. When women wear the turban, for example the mother in *The Toronto Star* photo, they are legitimatizing the idea that women are combating sexism in Sikhism or fighting for equalization within the religion. However, I argue that these turbaned women and girls are actually supporting what both Bell and Mahmood have suggested in their theoretical discussions on the body and the environment, that by claiming the turban as a form of religious excellence and by being pious or good, these women are consolidating notions of the “new ideal Sikh woman.”

I examine the image of Sikh women wearing turbans as portrayed in print media (newspapers), particularly in *The Toronto Star* over the past five years (2007–2011). As Appadurai argues:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary — these are all terms which direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. (29–30)

If I apply Appadurai's theory of *the image* to the idea of Sikh women wearing turbans, these women could be seen as a new "social practice" of the religion. The simple image of a new social practice can be viewed as empowerment and/or it can cause anxiety and/or create a ripple in the religious pond. Historically, there has been a tradition of women wearing turbans in Punjab since the early 1900s. As Jakobsh explains, Teja Singh Bhasaur led a radical Sikh group that was on the margins of the Singh Sabha movement. The group advocated for strict egalitarianism that demanded that both women and men not cut their hair and wear turbans (Jakobsh *Relocating* 213-215). Based on their research on Sikh women's identity formation on the World Wide Web, Jakobsh and Nesbitt conclude that images of women wearing turbans have been recklessly used and are expressing false information about the history of Sikh women who do wear turbans. Jakobsh and Nesbitt explain

These carefully constructed images are not only available within the online context, yet clearly, the boundlessness of the internet is an accelerated catalyst in the active construction of Sikh identity taking place. In the process, the image of the turbaned Sikh woman, for instance, despite the fact that it incontrovertibly does not mirror the realities of Sikh women worldwide, is cast instead as normative. (14–15)

I agree with both Jakobsh and Nesbitt that the history of Sikh women wearing turbans has not been accurately portrayed on various websites. The broader implications of these images are that it is creating a *normative* image for the collective identity of Sikh women. This then creates a division between Sikh women, that is, those women who wear a turban and those who do not. The image of a Sikh woman wearing a turban is out there, in both electronic and print media, such as the newspaper. I examine the narrative and photographs portrayed in *The Toronto Star* because the articles it is publishing capture the lives of Sikh women and girls and reveal the growing number of Sikh women who are wearing the turban and who are raising their children to do so as well. *Toronto Star* reporter Raveena Aulakh interviewed Sukhpreet Kaur (age 28) and her two children, son Jasjot (age 5) and daughter Livleen (age 3), regarding how Sikh women are wearing the turban in Canada. *The Toronto Star* published this article in July 2010. Figure 4.1 shows the photograph of the mother and her children that accompanied the article.

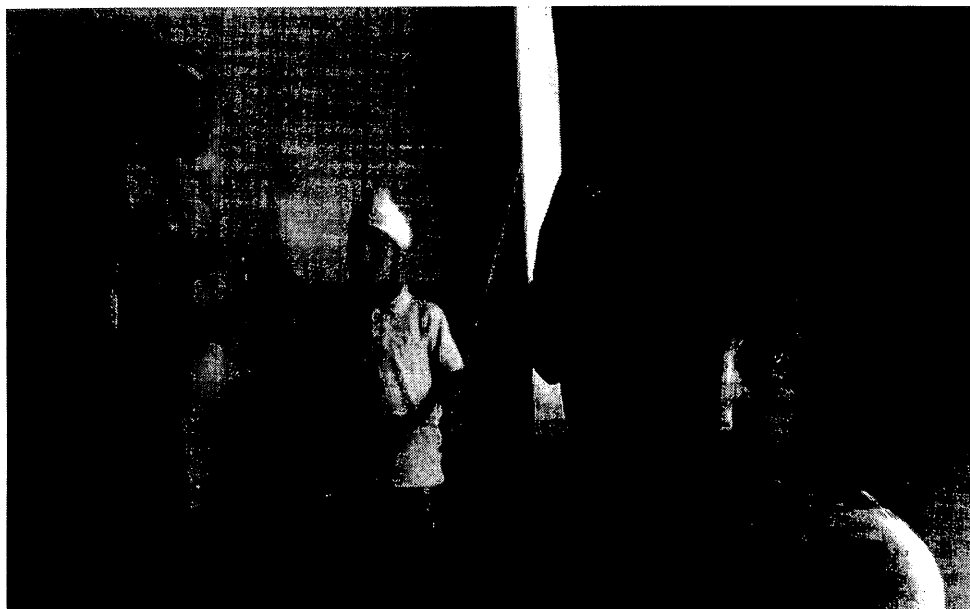


Figure. 4.1. From Raveena Aulakh, “Crown of Faith,” *The Toronto Star*, July 26, 2010. Photo by Richard Lautens.

The caption reads, “Livleen, 3, foreground, wears a turban, as does her mother, Sukhpreet Kaur, 28, left, and brother Jasjot, 5. More women reportedly wear the turban in North America than in Punjab, India.” The young boy in the background is wearing a *patka*, which is usually worn by younger children and which covers the whole head with the hair wrapped at the top of the head in a bun. A *rumal* is for very young children where the hair is exposed and a small handkerchief is placed over the bun and held in place with an elastic band. However, Livleen is wearing what has been termed a “woman’s turban.” The article states, “The turban that Sikh women wear is rounded, not pointed like the ones worn by men. They come in a variety of colours and styles, including polka-dot and tie-dyed. Some places even sell ready-made turbans.” Aulakh reports that Sukhpreet Kaur, the mother, has “worn a turban since she was a toddler” (A4).

A new social body, that is, a mother and her children wearing a version of a turban to signal religious practice within Sikhism, is what is being transmitted through this photograph. The embodiment of religion suggests an empowerment for Sikh women but the only way to access that power is through wearing a turban. Within the article, the children are not quoted but rather the mother speaks for them: "I've told her that she's a princess and wears a crown on her head. That's what she should tell everyone" (Aulakh D4). The mother is proud that her three-year-old daughter participated in a "turban-tying contest for young men" in Mississauga at the Ontario Khalsa Darbar. Aulakh explains, "Livleen wanted to participate but it was only for men. Her parents took her anyway and the feisty 3-year-old was given a special appreciation award" (D4). Because the turban is a male signifier, women who take up this symbol are seen as equal within the cultural and religious milieu of Canada, even if the woman is a three-year-old girl.

Sunera Thobani suggests that the South Asian diasporic subject learns very quickly that "the wearing of the salwar-kameez will be tolerated, even admired, but not the hijab" (170). But the image of a woman and a man wearing a turban is also tolerated within Canada. The turbaned woman is being positioned as an equalizer between the genders. The hijab is not worn by men; it is only worn by women. So the debate of religious symbols is altered when speaking about turbaned Sikh women because the wearing originated with Sikh males.

The debate is complex; you have young Sikh women wearing the turban within a Sikh community that is situated in Canada, and she is somewhat supported in her choice because generally the males fought for this right. The turbaned woman becomes the

image that can be celebrated by both the nation-state and religious local communities and by feminist movements that argue for choices for women. The turbaned Sikh man is not celebrated in the same manner; he is wearing his turban out of custom while she declares her identity under the guise of choice. When women take up the turban the image that is supported is not a feminist choice but rather a misguided notion of power and control. The representation of Sikhism has been a Sikh man wearing a turban; this representation has been created by men and has been sustained by Sikh men. And they have described, created and interpreted the religion from a male-centric point of view. That representation creates power and authority and the circle begins when women attempt to obtain that power.

By wearing turbans, Sikh women are announcing and performing their religious identity, but at the same time they interrupt and unsettle notions of the turban as masculine, thereby complicating simple, essentialist or binary notions of appropriate gender/religious performance. In order to access and gain power, some women are attempting to locate themselves in this subordination while at the same time attempting to shift out of this subordination. Sikh women are using Sikh religious tools such as the turban in order to assert their identity and step out from the shadows of Sikh men. When Sikh men began to wear the turban as a religious marker, for the most part women did not. In order to embody the symbol, Sikh women became “keepers” of the symbol. For example, Sikh women aided men in wearing turbans by washing or pre-tying turbans for

their husbands and sons.<sup>27</sup> The Sikh women are part of the social practice of wearing a turban but their bodies are viewed through the ritualized bodies of their male counterparts.

### **The Teenaged Years: Chunni Over Turban?**

In my research, *The Guru's Gift: An Ethnography Exploring Gender Equality with North American Sikh Women*, written by Cynthia Keppley Mahmood and Stacy Brady, is the only ethnographic study that addresses women and turbans. Mahmood and Brady interviewed thirteen Sikh women living across Canada and the United States and asked them to discuss what it meant for them to be Sikh women. Within this text, some of the women who were interviewed speak about their teenage years when the pressure to fit into a North America culture profoundly affected their identity. So far, there are no statistics on Sikh women wearing turbans in Canada.

For my purpose here I want to focus on chapter 3 of *The Guru's Gift*, "Living Up to the Turban." The women interviewed and included in this chapter ranged from orthodox Sikh women who wear turbans (Harmanjot, Amanpreet, Rajvinder and Daljot) to women who were "in the process of wearing a turban" (50). The editors conclude that for the Sikh women interviewed, "the turban, the Khalsa identity, and Sikhism were inextricably linked with their personal identity" (50), and for these women a Sikh woman is someone who is an *amritdhari* Sikh who has "special responsibilities and obligations,

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<sup>27</sup> An example of how women see themselves as "keepers" of the symbol is presented in a short story, *Montreal 1962*, by Sikh Canadian-American writer, Shauna Singh Baldwin in which a Sikh woman immigrates to Canada and washes, dries and even ties her husband's turban.



and take[s] lifelong vows to follow the Sikh tenets” (28). Regardless of which religious sect or denomination of Sikhism they followed, these women viewed the turban and wearing the Five Ks as a hierarchical religious ladder. At the time of the interview, Taranjeet, was in her mid-twenties and, as Mahmood and Brady state, “enjoyed being outrageous and shocking” (24). I do not find her comments shocking but rather a perfect example of how patriarchy and male power have seeped into women’s consciousness.

For many Sikh women, the idea of being “recognized as a Sikh” is very important to how they secure their identity. Sikh boys, for example, are trained in defending and maintaining their Sikh identity at an early age through the wearing of the turban and having turban-tying contests catered to them, as was mentioned in *The Toronto Star* article above. Unless Sikh girls assert their presence within the Gurdwara or within the community, they will skim the surface by existing precariously between identities: Taranjeet’s narrative is a perfect example. Taranjeet expresses freely her desire to wear a turban and how it is linked with gender. She was in her late teens when she underwent a “spiritual change” at a Sikh camp. These camps are religious camps that instruct youth in religious practices such as reading the *Guru Granth Sahib*, taking Punjabi language instruction and generally learning how to “be a Sikh.” The camps often have gendered activities, for example, girls learn how to cook rotis in the kitchen and boys learn how to tie a turban. As Taranjeet explains, she wanted to wear a turban and learn how to be more Sikh, which for her included becoming more “pure.” She felt that by being “pure” she would strengthen her resistance to culture’s notions of beauty and gender construction. She stopped cutting her hair and stopped shaving her legs because, according to her

understanding, “Khalsa Sikh are prohibited from cutting any hair on the body” (Mahmood and Brady 66). Taranjeet reflected on how she was permitted to drop some of the traditional gender rules because of this new, classically male, identity marker: “The other really interesting thing at camp was that once I put the turban on, when all the girls went down to learn the dances, I was invited to go down with the guys and do Sikh martial arts, all because I had the turban on” (Mahmood and Brady 69). The martial arts club was controlled by men and, therefore, Taranjeet had to “look” like a Sikh man in order to be invited. Taranjeet is considered to be an *amritdhari* Sikh, meaning she has been reborn into the Sikh religion by having taken *amrit*, the baptism ceremony that is the first step to being initiated into Sikhism. Taranjeet expresses the angst that she underwent when she began to wear a turban:

. . . once I put that turban on, I wasn’t viewed as a person anymore. I didn’t have an individual personality anymore, I was a representative of something else. I felt like I couldn’t swear or be the person I was before. I had to be an ambassador for Sikhism, but being an ambassador for Sikhism meant that I had to follow someone else’s rules. There was none of my own identity left. (Mahmood and Brady72)

Taranjeet expresses loss here, a sense of losing a part of her own identity when she began to wear the turban. Therefore, Taranjeet encapsulates the power of the symbol — she now embodies the “historical practice” as well as Sikh religious ideology through a masculine image. Instead of solidifying a Sikh identity, the wearing of the turban caused her anxiety. By wearing the turban, a Sikh woman adds a new ritualized religious body to

the Sikh religion and, in turn, creates a new religious environment that articulates a new space for Sikh women alongside Sikh men. According to Bell, through religious rituals the “social body internalizes the principles of the environment being generated” (305); therefore, within a religious environment, the body becomes imprinted with the principles and the doctrines of the religion. As a result, people who wear religious symbols then create an environment in which the social body becomes indoctrinated with images associated with their specific religious beliefs. Bell argues that within a religious environment the “body internalizes the principles of the environment” (3) and, accordingly, Sikh women like Taranjeet have internalized the need to identify as a Sikh like their male counterparts. Bell explains that religious symbols and rituals then produce “ritualized agents” (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* 100). Taranjeet, in this case is a ritualized agent and she tries to execute the exact performance of wearing a turban. Within the popular imagination of Sikhism, there is only one woman ever associated with a turban or even shown wearing a turban. Her name was Mai Bhago. She lived in the district of Amritsar in Punjab and was the wife of a Sikh soldier. At the Battle of Muktsar (1705), forty soldiers decided not to fight alongside Guru Gobind Singh. When these men returned to the village and explained their decision to their wives, Mai Bhago told the women that it was up to them to take up arms. The men felt ashamed for their cowardly actions and returned with Mai Bhago to the battlefield (Jakobsh; Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh; Sidhu). There are many images of her on the internet and in most of them she is depicted as wearing a turban that is covered by a headscarf (chunni). The image I have

chosen to show in Figure 4.2 is a typical image of her on the battlefield wearing both a chunni and a turban.



Figure. 4.2. Mai Bhago at the Battle of Muktsar, 1705. (Canadian Sikh Heritage website, <http://www.canadiansikhheritage.ca>).

Just to be clear, there is no historical evidence that Mai Bhago wore a turban; this is part of the marvelous myth-making associated with Bhago. Mahmood and Brady explain that, within their interviews, Sikh women who were wearing turbans cited Mai Bhago as their ideal role model. These women have internalized a myth-making moment in which a woman, Mai Bhago, asserted herself and took up the “masculine role of soldier” (Mahmood and Brady 63). As Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh argues: Sikh women who wear the turban are asserting that to wear a turban sets them apart from other Sikh women and brings them closer to the “ideal” Sikh woman. But let me take this a step further; the ideal Sikh women are then used against other Sikh women who are considered not to be “Sikh” enough. Taranjeet’s experience of wearing a turban within the camp was a positive one and it allowed her to cross the gender line into Sikh religious fundamental

space. She was no longer viewed as “just a Sikh woman,” she was seen as a “fundamentalist Sikh woman,” or rather to use Bell’s term, a “ritualized agent” which set her up as a religious person who could not skim the surface of identities. Taranjeet felt pressure to be “overly religious” because of the symbol on her head and, in the process, she lost her “self”: “There was none of my own identity left” (Mahmood and Brady 72) and she eventually discontinues wearing the turban.

Taranjeet decided to stop wearing the turban not only because of this lack of identity for herself but also because her family did not support her decision. Taranjeet reveals how her mother and grandmother cried when she returned home from camp wearing a turban and asked her bluntly, “What the hell have you done to yourself?” (Mahmood and Brady 70). One of their arguments was whether any Sikh man would marry such a religious woman once she started wearing a turban. Another was that a religious woman would only be a good wife for another religious man. Needless to say, the women in her family did not agree with her decision to wear the turban. When Taranjeet’s mother asked her why she was wearing a turban, Taranjeet’s answer was telling, “I didn’t really know why I was doing this” (71). When women are seen as equal to men they are seen as competing for the same power as men. When Taranjeet stopped wearing the turban, she saw it as a failure on her part as a woman; she felt unsupported and belittled herself when she saw other turbaned women:

When I started seeing these women with turbans and I started being involved in this Sikh group, I felt myself being angry toward them or some sort of resentment . . . I saw her [turbaned woman] taking it further than I was able to and I think that

it intimidated me because I was like “Am I doing everything I can to be a Sikh?”

(Mahmood and Brady 72)

Here we are back to the same old question of “What is a Sikh?” The same question that many multigenerational Sikhs continue to ask themselves today.

Taranjeet’s life narrative does not end there. Taranjeet doubles up on her religious gear and wears a turban and a headscarf:

I wore a headscarf for a while and you can’t move as much as when you wear a turban. In a turban you can walk with your head held high . . . I put a scarf on top of it (her turban) and then I felt beautiful too, because before I was very masculine in my turban . . . but then when I put the scarf on top of it, there was something so elegant about it and how I felt about myself. I have this one picture of me in it and I really treasure it. It is such a snapshot of me for a second and how I felt. It doesn’t look like me; I don’t necessarily relate to that part of it. Instead, it’s a girl in a turban with a scarf and she looks like she can really carry herself and do whatever she needs to. (Mahmood and Brady 71–72)

So here we have Taranjeet who attempted to wear both symbols, even though she found the turban restrictive. Here she feels beautiful, but she still loses her sense of identity with just the turban and needs the added chunni to make herself feel elegant. According to Bell, symbols and rituals are “not the mere display of subjective states or corporate values;” rather, they are “act[s] of production—the production of a ritualized agent able to wield physically a scheme of subordination or insubordination” (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 100). Therefore, for Taranjeet she is challenging the boundaries of wearing a

turban. For Bell, symbols and rituals are not merely tools or instruments of power or social control; they are "strategic modes of practice" which produce "nuanced relationships of power, relationships characterized by acceptance and resistance, negotiated appropriation, and redemptive reinterpretation of the hegemonic order" (196). So by wearing the chunni over the turban, Taranjeet, is appropriating, resisting and reinterpreting the image a Sikh woman. Taranjeet is not alone in this idea. The following image of a young Sikh girl wearing both a turban and a chunni is one that has been seen in Toronto. In Figure 4.3, a young girl is celebrating "Khasla Day" on the streets of downtown Toronto wearing both a turban and a chunni.



Figure. 4.3. "Khalsa Day," *The Toronto Star*, May 6, 2011. Photo by Vince Talotta.

When a woman wears a turban, her body becomes inscribed with religious identity and this identity is masculine. In order to be seen as a girl, the young woman in Figure 4.3 has placed a chunni on top of her turban. We can relate these images to Taranjeet's gender

performance anxiety, which is connected to being identified as being a Sikh first and a woman second. This twofold anxiety is complex because she sees these symbols as hierarchical. And the male turban is at the centre of this hierarchy, which is codified as masculine. However, these young women are again appropriating, resisting and reinterpreting the image a Sikh woman. As Bell argues, rituals and symbols are not static; they are *strategic* acts with which to define the present (101).

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh insists that “deep-seated notions of male hegemony have to disappear rather than women’s hair beneath a turban and perhaps there would not even be a need for women to wear a turban if they [women] were treated equally by their families and society” (188). With Taranjeet’s story and with the above photo, we begin to understand the confusion that young Sikh women feel, and as pointed out above, how that confusion can push them away from their own self-identity.

*Gender Performance Anxiety: Sikh Men Wearing Dupattas*

Sikh Scholar Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh asks, “With women wearing the turban, we are only moving in the male direction. And that is very troublesome. Why don’t we see men taking on wearing *dupattas*? Why, why should my question sound so far-fetched?” (188). Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh’s position hinges on the idea that Sikh identity should not be caught up in religious symbols. However, the debates around Sikh identity have gained momentum since the creation and initiation of the Khalsa. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh is correct in asking about women’s historical markers of braids or *dupattas*. These are external physical markers as well, so why are these symbols not celebrated by Sikh women and men? In Mahmood and Brady’s text, the thirteen women



interviewed do not look to their mothers for strength and religious instruction. The women do not speak about their mothers' or their grandmothers' braids or about their stories. Rather, these women speak about how their mothers did not agree with their daughters when they chose to wear the turban, as in the case of Taranjeet.

How, then, to answer the second part of Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's question, "Why don't we see men taking on wearing *dupattas*? Why, why should my question sound so far-fetched?" (188). I have found that Sikh men who have donned *dupattas* have only done so in a comedic way. They would not, of course, ever consider wearing headscarves as a symbol of power and Sikh identity. One of the more compelling performances comes from the North American comedy group AKakaAmazing, a group of four young Sikh Canadian men poking fun at their parents. The young men are living in what they call a "Brown Family" and play up stereotypes of Sikh men and women. They even take up wearing *dupattas/chunnis* when cross-dressing in their performance entitled "Hating Aunties." The scene is shot in an untidy living room, the Aunties are speaking in Punjabi and in high-pitched voices and, while they are wearing *dupattas*, they are not wearing braids. Two of them are wearing their *dupattas* over their baseball hats. The baseball hats are, of course, necessary because they are required by the code of masculinity, and they cannot perform as "Aunties" without the codes of masculine performance intact. Also of note is that none of these young men is wearing a turban and each of them has short-cropped hair. Yet, when they act as "Aunties," they state that they cannot find "good" young men for their daughters, and one "Auntie" states that one potential groom is unsuitable because "he cut his hair." So there is acknowledgment that

their performance is a contradiction of their own lived subject positions. They would disappoint any Auntie looking for a “good” Sikh man. While these young men are performing a twofold identity, it is not as conflicted as Taranjeet’s. They reveal that a Sikh woman’s position is of a woman or a mother who cooks, cleans, takes care of her in-laws, as well as carrying the burden of upholding the religious institutions such as the Gurdwara and maintaining cultural rituals such as getting their daughters married. Second, when I view these young men’s skits through a feminist lens, they replay for us what is actually going on, that is when they act as “Aunties” who gossip and speak behind each other’s back or when they gossip about their daughters and how “modern” some families are, they reveal how patriarchy has seeped into our everyday lives. It is through this comedic mode and the visual cue of men wearing *dupattas* that gives us a glimpse of how men (and young men at that) “perform” Sikh women. These men are performing in drag.

When women wear turbans, they are seen as stepping towards religious equality. Yet the turbaned woman holds an unstable subject position: she does not have the luxury of comically depicting her position within the Sikh religious community. She must take seriously all the religious codes, even if these codes are patriarchal notions. I would even go as far as saying that a woman’s position, even if she honours the Five Ks and whether or not she wears a turban, is fraught and undermined by the male hegemony. If men were to wear *dupattas*, it would not be seen as religious equality. By performing as “Aunties” who wear *dupattas*, the young men in AKakaAmazing speak volumes about women’s lack of power and how both women and men uphold patriarchal structure. An example of

a woman taking up a turban/topknot within the comic mode was the subject of a Bollywood film, *Dil Bole Hadippa* (2009).

*A Gendered Bending of Bollywood*

The Bollywood film *Dil Bole Hadippa* (2009) depicts a young woman donning a topknot in order to join an all-male cricket team. The film was shot on location in India and had a début at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2009. It was directed by Anurag Singh and written by Jaya-Aparajita. Its story follows a similar narrative arc to the Hollywood movie *She's the Man* (2006), and both films can be read as modern versions of Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*.

The story in *Dil Bole Hadippa* is centred on a cricket tournament called the Aman Cup, which is held on Independence Day. The Indian team has lost the last nine matches to the Pakistani team. The head of the Indian team is frustrated and is desperate to win a game. He calls his son Rohan, who is living with his mother in London. Rohan is a cricket star and agrees to coach a new Indian team, but on his terms, and he announces try-outs for the whole village. Veera Kaur, a young woman who works in a travelling circus, loves cricket and is an excellent bat-person. She attends the try-outs but is turned away at the gates because she is a woman, and she is told to join a women's cricket team. She returns the next day, disguised as a man, wearing a topknot, a fake beard and a Kara. He introduces "himself" as Veer Pratap Singh. Veer proves himself on the cricket pitch and is asked to join the team. The love story between Rohan and Veera is lighthearted and comical and she conceals the fact that she is Veer by saying Veera is her sister. The film ends with the cricket match, and while Rohan and Veer are in the lead, Veer's

contact lens falls out and, in the process of finding it, Veera is discovered by Rohan. He is upset by her dishonesty while he does not reveal to the audience Veer's gender, he does ask "Veer" to leave. When Rohan is asked by his father to allow Veer to play, knowing her gender, Rohan agrees because Rohan knows how important it is for his father to win. During the game, Veer/Veera is tripped by an opposing team member and fractures her arm, but she/he continues to play and wins the game. At the conclusion of the film, Rohan asks Veer/Veera to reveal his/her identity and she does. She then gives a speech that focuses on the equality of women playing sports with the men and becomes accepted by the cricket teams.

I categorize this as a feminist film because the queer elements have been softened or removed, therefore losing any connection to the Shakespeare play or the Hollywood production. For example, the character Soniya Saluja, the model who is in love with Rohan, does not fall in love with Veer. Rather, Veer explains to Soniya that she needs to be "more desi" or more Indian in order to capture Rohan's love. When that does not work, Veer tells her to find someone else who is more of an "Indian" man. The cross-dressing is within a patriarchal space, for example, the cricket field, and at the conclusion of the film, all the characters have to submit to hegemonic nationalist performance. The relationship between the cross-dressing for the sake of masculinity and the nation is evoked in the film.

The pleasure that Veera takes in playing the role of a man is seen in the dance numbers and, because no one on screen really knows what she is up to, she doesn't experience any embarrassment but rather can joyfully play the role. The embarrassment

only occurs when Rohan finds out about the cross-dressing at the end of the story. But even then because the father requests that Veer re-enter the game, Rohan agrees but demands that Veera reveal herself when it's over. The tools that are used to make Veera a "man" are the religious tools of the Sikh religion. The turban/topknot for Veera/Veer is used as a way to keep her hair up and is a way to disguise her gender. The film uses the first few lines of *Guru Granth Sahib* when Veera/Veer is up to bat, and both Sikh gendered last names are used to indicate gender performance: Kaur and Singh. Veera does not maintain the male representation at the conclusion of the film; instead, she removes her topknot and beard in front of everyone. Her body throughout the film represents a Sikh man, who is generally performed as a defeminized male in some Bollywood productions. In Bollywood films, it is very rare to see a Sikh character in a leading role; however, when they are seen on screen, Sikh men (in particular) are the comic relief within the film and are not essential to the main storyline.<sup>28</sup> For *Dil Bole Hadippa*, the film's producers would have understood that in order to unify an Indian and Pakistani audience the most productive approach would be to show the local divide along religious lines in sports. Women in the film are seen as active agents for the nation. For

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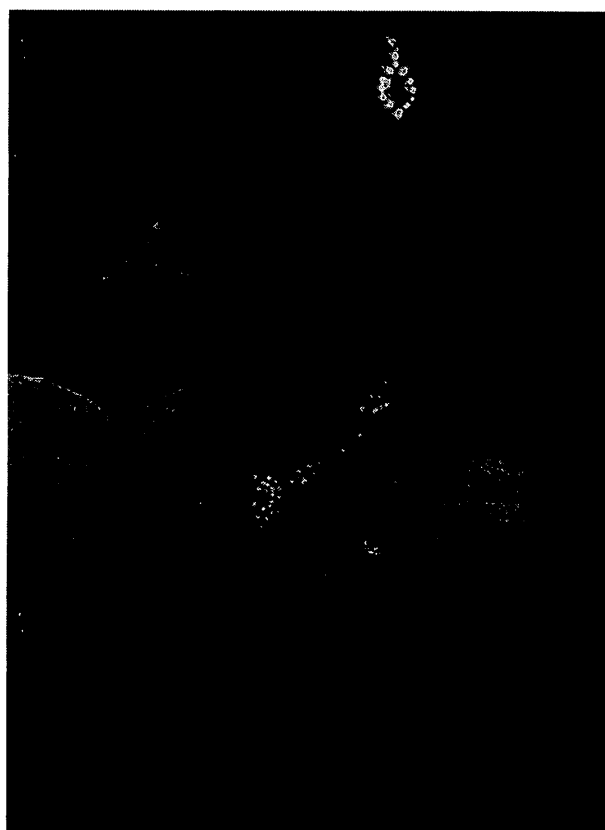
<sup>28</sup> It was in 2001 that they were given more of a religious presence within films with the release of *Lagaan* (Land Tax), directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, and *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (Treason: A Love Story), directed by Anil Sharma. The Sikh characters in both of these films were the central storyline. In *Lagaan*, the Sikh character Deba Singh Sodh is a former spy for the British; he is a secondary character who is respected by his cricket teammates because of his skills at cricket and for his knowledge of the British rules of the game. In comparison, the Sikh character in *Gadar*, Tara Singh, played by Sunny Deol, is the central character. *Gadar* is set in 1947 during the Partition of India and is a love story between Tara Singh and his Muslim wife Sakina, played by Anisha Patel. *Gadar* switched the religion from Hindu to Sikh and the language from Hindi to Punjabi and, for the first time, I began to see Sikh characters and issues taken seriously and included in the main narrative of the film.

example, Veera shows Rohan the “real India” and in the dance sequence women are seen working the fields, making rotis, washing laundry, and so on. Again, Indian women embody and perform the elements of an Indian national discourse. Jyotika Viridi, a scholar on Hindi film, explains that Hindi films after independence from British Rule “are shot through with a fascination with the ‘new nation,’ its present, past, and future” (1). Viridi is writing about India as a “new nation” after independence and argues that the Hindi cinema agenda is “imagining a unified nation” (1). This “new unified nation” is India within the film, and the film attempts to showcase how this “new nation” became unified through religious secularism, sports and gender acceptance. The film uses the tools of Sikhism, but because religion is not the main focus, it can be seen as a secular film

### *Turban, Facial Hair and Cleavage*

In the works discussed in this dissertation, second-generation Sikh women are addressing the intersections between religion and culture and exploring how they can recognize themselves within these categories. What does it mean to be a Sikh woman in the twenty-first century? The answer, for me, becomes expressed as a visual image because of media representations of Sikh women and because young Sikh women are visually carrying the burden of religious identification, an identification that is being “policed” by parents, both mothers and fathers, and by society at large. I will answer this question by analyzing two photos that have surfaced on the Internet over the past year. Many young women are wearing the turban as a way to express their own religious

identity. However, this identity is forever changing and evolving. A perfect example of this changing and evolving identity is a photograph of a young woman named Dalveer Kaur. She writes a blog entitled “dalveer’s universe” (<http://dalveer.posterous.com>) and under her profile describes herself as a “turbanista with opinions to tickle your imagination” (n.p.). She lives in the UK and has been keeping this blog since January 2012. On July 9, 2012, the title of her blog post was “The Religious Police,” in which she included the photo in Figure 4.4.



**Figure. 4.4.** Photo of Dalveer Kaur from “The Religious Police”(<http://wwwhttp://dalveer.posterous.com>)

She states in the first line of this blog post,

I recently encountered the horrible side of faith. The Sikh religious police apparently felt so overcome with their own religious zest that they felt it their duty to tell me I'm not a good Sikh because I dress the way I do. Well! A barrage of messages flowed. The discussion was long and heated. My rather stunning picture, even if I must say so myself as the target of their hate. (Kaur n.p.)

Where and when the photo was first used or accessed by these “religious police” is unclear from her blog. Since posting her own photo on her blog, she has received seventy-four responses. A person named @JazzTheJournos seems to fill in the gaps of the discussion:

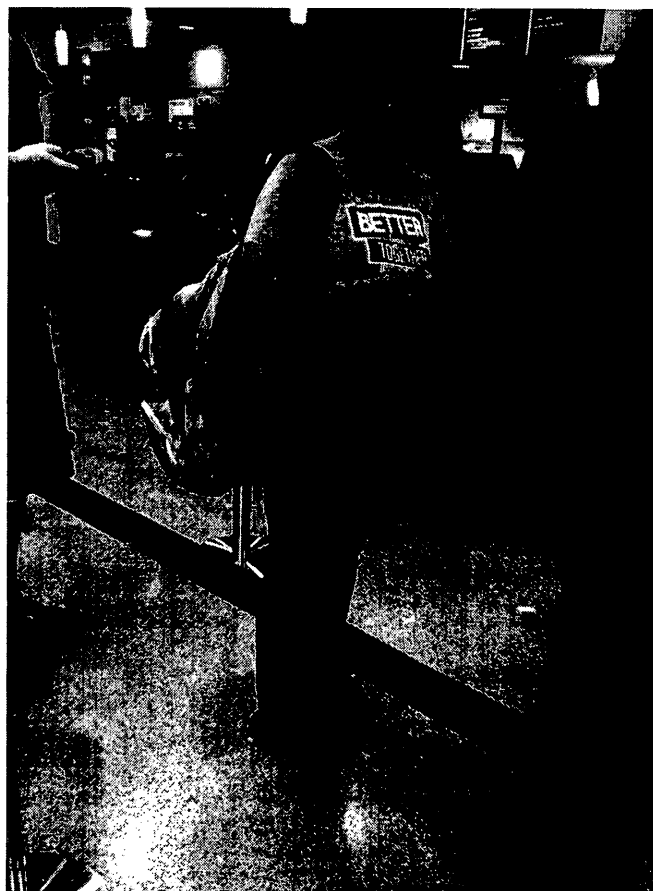
This blog piece does not even make a mention of the discussion. Do you think it is right for a Singhni to show cleavage? How about if a Singh walked into a Gurdwara topless? Don't make sense. The way Sikhs (real Sikhs) are meant to dress is to show modesty, a lack of vanity — I am sorry if I am part of the religious police but I think showing cleavage and wearing make up is a sign of vanity. There is a difference between looking presentable and looking desirable.

Of course the journey is between one's self and The Maker, but if you seem misguided it is up to elders to show you the right way. All the best.

From what I have gathered and from how I have read the image and the blog posts, Kaur is the “target of their hate” not because she is wearing a turban but because she is wearing a turban with a dress that shows cleavage, and she is wearing makeup and jewelry.



The posting by @JazzTheJourn0 shows the misogyny as well as the ageist elements that are being used to attack Sikh women for their self-assertion or for their interpretation of Sikhism. The message from @JazzTheJourn0 is that in order to be a real Sikh woman in the twenty-first century, the woman must dress modestly, look presentable but not desirable, not wear makeup or adorn her body with jewelry or anything else. As a Sikh woman, Dalveer Kaur uses the turban as a religious marker of difference. In her blog post she explains that her “initial reaction was to say ‘FUCK OFF’ to the ‘religious police,’” but she does not; in fact, she cannot remember what she said. She concludes: “I guess it didn’t matter so much in the end.” Her blog post is one way she has gained back her voice and the blogosphere becomes a place where she can vent. However, once again young Sikh women have to be put in the line of fire in order to defend their freedom of expression. Kaur’s photo is an example of the religious performance that I addressed in chapter 4. Judith Butler’s idea of gender performance and Catherine Bell’s theory of the religious social body as it internalizes within the environment equals the religious performance of Dalveer Kaur’s photograph.



**Figure. 4.5.** Photo of Balpreet Kaur from the Reddit site.

Someone named “european\_douchebag” posted the photo of Balpreet Kaur in Figure 4.5 on the internet site “Reddit” on September 21, 2012. It was posted under the category of “Funny” and was tagged “I’m not sure what to conclude from this.” What occurred next was that many people started posting Balpreet Kaur’s photo on social media sites and calling her inspirational. Balpreet Kaur responded to the Reddit site the next day. She explained, “she is the girl from the picture.” I have included her complete response:

Hey, guys. This is Balpreet Kaur, the girl from the picture. I actually didn't know about this until one of my friends told me on facebook. If the OP wanted a picture, they could have just asked and I could have smiled :) However, I'm not embarrassed or even humiliated by the attention (negative and positive) that this picture is getting because, it's who I am. Yes, I'm a baptized Sikh woman with facial hair. Yes, I realize that my gender is often confused and I look different than most women. However, baptized Sikhs believe in the sacredness of this body — it is a gift that has been given to us by the Divine Being (which is genderless, actually) and, must keep it intact as a submission to the divine will. Just as a child doesn't reject the gift of his/her parents, Sikhs do not reject the body that has been given to us. By crying “mine, mine” and changing this body-tool, we are essentially living in ego and creating separateness between ourselves and the divinity within us. By transcending societal views of beauty, I believe that I can focus more on my actions. My attitude and thoughts and actions have more value in them than my body because I recognize that this body is just going to become ash in the end, so why fuss about it? When I die, no one is going to remember what I looked like, heck, my kids will forget my voice, and slowly, all physical memory will fade away. However, my impact and legacy will remain: and, by not focusing on the physical beauty, I have time to cultivate those inner virtues and hopefully, focus my life on creating change and progress for this world in any way I can. So, to me, my face isn't important but the smile and the happiness that lie behind the face are. :-) So, if anyone sees me at OSU, please come up and say hello. I appreciate all of the comments here, both positive and less positive because I've gotten a better understanding of myself and others from this. Also, the yoga pants are quite comfortable and the Better Together T-shirt is actually from Interfaith Youth Core, an organization that focuses on storytelling and engagement between different faiths. :) I hope this explains everything a bit more, and I apologize for causing such confusion and uttering anything that hurt anyone.

As of September 27, 2012, Balpreet Kaur's image was still being “passed” around on the Internet. Balpreet Kaur's response has been seen as “dignified, graceful and generous” (Bennett-Smith n.p.). What is of note is how Balpreet Kaur's image and her response by apologizing has placed her and the faith in a more favourable light<sup>29</sup>. The mainstream

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<sup>29</sup> The individual who posted the photo originally read Balpreet Kaur's response and apologized and claimed that he had been educating himself on Sikhism. I have included “european\_douchebag” apology to *Reddit* and to Balpreet Kaur here:

I posted this link a few days ago:  
[http://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/109cnf/im\\_not\\_sure\\_what\\_to\\_conclude](http://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/109cnf/im_not_sure_what_to_conclude)

media mostly celebrates Kaur's subject position because it is seen as a choice of religion and a choice not to participate in the mainstream definition of beauty. On the site, *feministing.com*, one writer named Samhita published a post praising Kaur for not being ashamed of facial hair, and she continues "What is most impressive to me about this, is

from this/. I know that this post ISN'T a funny post but I felt the need to apologize to the Sikhs, Balpreet, and anyone else I offended when I posted that picture. Put simply it was stupid. Making fun of people is funny to some but incredibly degrading to the people you're making fun of. It was an incredibly rude, judgmental, and ignorant thing to post.

/r/Funny wasn't the proper place to post this. Maybe /r/racism or /r/douchebagsofreddit or /r/intolerance would have been more appropriate. Reddit shouldn't be about putting people down, but a group of people sending cool, interesting, or funny things. Reddit's been in the news alot lately about a lot of cool things we've done, like a freaking AMA by the president. I'm sorry for being the part of reddit that is intolerant and douchebaggy. This isn't 4chan, or 9gag, or some other stupid website where people post things like I did. It's fucking reddit. Where some pretty amazing stuff has happened.

I've read more about the Sikh faith and it was actually really interesting. It makes a whole lot of sense to work on having a legacy and not worrying about what you look like. I made that post for stupid internet points and I was ignorant.

So reddit I'm sorry for being an asshole and for giving you negative publicity.

Balpreet, I'm sorry for being a closed minded individual. You are a much better person than I am

Sikhs, I'm sorry for insulting your culture and way of life.

Balpreet's faith in what she believes is astounding.

EDIT: Forgot a word and realized r/douchebagsofreddit is actually a thing!

EDIT 2: I Just want to clarify that yes this apology is terribly and horribly worded; but hopefully you realize that IT IS sincere. It was more of a general apology to Reddit, the Sikh community, and anyone offended. I apologized to Balpreet in private via e-mail and plan on meeting up with her next time I'm at Ohio State. I don't think I did anything special, it was just an apology. Just because you're anonymous doesn't mean you can be an asshole.

not just the courage and pride this young woman feels in who she is, but also that she is pushing both normative standards of beauty and gender construction in Sikhism. She even follows up with a clarifying comment about how she wears a headdress to show other Sikhs she is equal to them in her faith, irrelevant of her gender” (Samhita n.p.).

If Balpreet Kaur’s image is being upheld, then the question of “who is a Sikh” is being answered. Sikh women wearing the turban have to add to the turban in order to be taken seriously as a Sikh. They have to add a *chunni* or disregard any type of beauty rituals and allow their body to simply be adorned with religious symbols. To add yet another ‘new wave’ – but it too can only be viewed through an identity politic that continues to be situated in a male-centered religion. The desire to wear a turban stems from the environment – an environment that was constructed around religious symbols that are rooted in a patriarchal image. Therefore, when Sikh women wear turbans and a *chunni*, they reflect a patriarchal image, and this identity reads as “overly religious” and/or as a male identifier. The image of Sikh men with long beards and turbans wearing each of the Five Ks is being replaced with women wearing turbans and another new wave of women wearing a *chunni* over a turban; but this religious shift is predicated on gender subordination. If the turban continues to signify a male tradition and if a *chunni* signifies female tradition then simply placing one on top of each only creates an environment in which women are upholding and supporting both gendered traditions. When women wear the turban, it solidifies the answer of who is a Sikh and who is not. The answer is visible and clear — only those who have been initiated, who physically wear their symbols and who follow the tenets of the religion can be considered a Sikh.

The situations surrounding how these images of Sikh women have surfaced on the internet are similar. Both Dalveer Kaur's and Balpreet Kaur's photos were uploaded and put on display *without* their permission. Both women responded to defend themselves against society's views of beauty and to explain their views on Sikhism. What is of note is how Balpreet Kaur's image is being held up as an image of a strong, graceful woman, whereas Dalveer Kaur's image is questioned as suspicious or "attention seeking" because of how she is dressed. Dalveer Kaur's spirituality is from a Sikh tradition; however, she does not see a problem with showing cleavage while wearing a turban. In chapter 5, I addressed the images of young Sikh girls wearing turbans and the new image that they are creating as they begin to wear a chunnie on top of their turbans. As a second-generation Canadian who was raised as a Sikh in the 1980s and 1990s, I find these images troublesome at best, partly because of the lack of historical accuracy of women wearing turbans and partly because women's bodies continue to be the site of religious discourse.

In the late 1990s, non-white women began looking for other non-white women's experiences, and this dissertation is a contribution to that searching. In the edited collection *Returning the Gaze*, Himani Bannerji outlined that she was compiling critical writings because of the lack of published critical discourse by non-white women themselves. I return to this text because Bannerji's words that she spoke then are still relevant today:

There would be no critique if we did not begin from our actual lives ... By understanding "representation" to mean re-presentation of our realities, from a

foundationally critical/revolutionary perspective, there can emerge the possibility of making our very marginality itself the epicenter for change. This has always been the principle of any fundamentally revolutionary or critical perspective. (xx–xxi)

The actual lives of Sikh women are in process, and finding the portrayal or the representation of their realities continues to take shape, even as I conclude the writing of this dissertation. There may always be a bit of obedience and a bit more of rebellion in this process until a finer balance is struck, or until Sikh women take an extreme or stronger stand and no longer allow garments or codes to rule their lives.

For me, the visual of a woman wearing a turban signals an undercurrent of both power and powerlessness. The visual image disrupts the religious performance of both genders as well as draws attention to the internal conflict within and between women. When Sikh women don turbans as a religious identifier, the discussion shifts into notions of gender (masculinity and femininity), power (patriarchal and power formations) and religious and cultural integration. As I have suggested earlier, women wearing turbans has become a religious and cultural marker for a new wave of Sikhs. The new wave of Sikh women wearing the turban and chunni can only be viewed through an identity politic that continues to be situated in a male-centred religion. The desire to wear a turban stems from the environment — an environment that was constructed around religious symbols that are rooted in a patriarchal image. Therefore, when Sikh women wear turbans, they reflect a patriarchal image, and this identity reads as “overly religious” and/or as a male identifier, as in the case of Taranjeet.

The turban continues to signify a male tradition and I suggest that Sikh women have begun to cultivate an environment in which the turban is at the centre of the religion. The image of Sikh men with long beards and turbans wearing each of the Five Ks is being replaced with young children and girls wearing turbans. I argue that through these images we are visually witnessing the religious shift within the Sikh community that is predicated on gender. In order to maintain the visual identity of the Sikhs, is being reissued to Sikh women. When women wear the turban, it solidifies the answer of who is a Sikh and who is not. The answer is visible and clear — only those who have been initiated, who physically wear their symbols and who follow the tenets of the religion can be considered a “Sikh.”



### Epilogue

In this dissertation I have looked at the various articulations of Sikh women's engagement with cultural productions such as poetry, literature, film, theatre productions and media images. I suggest that an emerging image of a Sikh woman, to use K. Gill's poetic line, continues to be "a ghostly figure in the fog" (*Dharma* 15). I opened this study with a quote from Rohinton Mistry's "Epilogue: 1984" from his novel *A Fine Balance*, in which a simple iron bangle or Kara is shown to slot people into religious identifications and cause tension between the wearer and the observer. In Basran's novel, Meena does not wear a Kara and to her surprise her mother does not argue with her about her choice. The Mother knows that her daughter does not need a symbol of resistance because for women the restraints or the handcuffs of oppression surround them regardless. In order to be visible or in order to step out of the shadows, some Sikh women are choosing to wear all of the Five Ks as well as the turban, and, as we have seen in media images, some women are voicing their concerns on stage and in the streets. For Sikh women writers, such as Gill, Basran and R. Gill, Sikhism, for the most part, is not something that they actively participate in or engage with. I conclude in chapter 1, that within Gill's poetry the women are working in the home and in the community, cooking in the langer hall and are too exhausted or disinterested in learning about religion after a long day's work. For women, Gill indicates that religion collapses into phrases such as "Vah Guru," and religion shifts and becomes normalized and is carried on as practices. The phases and practices become empty of meaning for generations of women. In her novel, Basran constructs religion using a technique that is similar to how Gill constructs religion in her

poetry. When Basran writes that Meena learns very little in Punjabi school and that the only prayer she learns is the Morning Prayer that includes her father's name "Akal," it tells us that religious instruction is the last thing on the minds of young Sikh women. Once again the men or the fathers are elevated as religious figures. Basran does not even provide a name for Meena's mother, even though it is the mother who provides for the six daughters. We read about the complex and abusive relationship that the six daughters have with their mother and mothers-in-law and the entire Sikh community that polices the entire family.

In R. Gill's memoir, her family is not overly religious and they do not attend the Gurdwara on a regular basis. R. Gill equates going to the Gurdwara with going to a restaurant. She writes, "I thought we were there just because that was where weddings were held and where the best aloo muttar sabi [potato and pea curry] was prepared" (22). Once again, we read how religion is collapsing into food items or various rituals such as weddings. There might be an awareness of religion that is peppered throughout the memoir, but Gill does not return to the religious space because it offers nothing other than a good meal. When the memoir, the novel and the poems are all read together, what is revealed is that for many women, Sikhism, it seems, is collapsing into phrases, idols, photographs, religious symbols or even food items. Unless women begin to question these articles or materials the answers will never surface as to why they are continuing rituals and patterns of behaviour. R. Gill concludes her memoir with an awareness that she needs to "keep doing right by [her]self," stating that she is highly capable of making decisions on her behalf and is carving out a new path for herself. The ongoing positive

relationship that she has with her family is something that needs to be highlighted because the relationships that many South Asian daughters have with their mothers can be strained due to cultural misunderstandings. As both Nayar and Handa have outlined, daughters of the Sikh diaspora are at times using various survival tactics in order to negotiate their images of “good” South Asian daughters.

As shown in the works of the playwright Bhatti, discussed in chapter 4 of this study, Sikh women are at the receiving end of patriarchal violence and are alienated and exploited within the religious institutions such as the Gurdwara. Bhatti’s plays reveal the causes of the tenuous relationship between the mothers and daughters, for example, homosexuality, sexual abuse, rape and how women become the transmitters of cultural social codes. As was the case for Bhatti herself, when she was airing out the “dirty laundry” of the local Sikh community, she was forced into hiding because the listener, the Sikh community, did not want to hear or see how Sikh women were being treated in the walls of the Gurdwara. Which brings us to the larger questions that have to be asked: Who is the listener? Who is the observer? Is it a non-white audience? Is it the Sikh community? Because patriarchal constructs maintain the gender hierarchy and have co-opted women into the folds of patriarchy, it is difficult, therefore, to hear or see the narratives of women.

The media images of young Sikh women who wear the turban have been put on display and these images act as a symbol for the collective consciousness within Sikhism. Leading scholars such as Jakobsh, Nesbitt, Nayar and Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh have raised concerns about the historical accuracy of Sikh women wearing turbans.

Nevertheless, there is an increase in the number of girls wearing turbans as I have shown in chapter 5. The images of Balpreet Kaur and Dalveer Kaur are examples of how Sikh women are using the power of the modern media to explain their religious subject position. Balpreet Kaur's action of responding directly on the Reddit website repositions and redefines Sikhism in terms of gender. The embodied and materialized practices of wearing a turban and all of the Five Ks have relied upon the specific performative roles for women in order to make themselves visible. The few women that find solace in Sikhism and in wearing the Five Ks, such as the young women on the streets of Toronto or Balpreet Kaur, textualize the religion in a way that makes them complicit within the strictest religious regulations. Dalveer Kaur, however, has opened up the discourse of what a turbaned Sikh woman looks like, cleavage and all. The modest dress argument was held up by the Sikh "religious police" as a way to control women's body, but Dalveer Kaur's voice is heard or rather read on her blog where she is able to stay "FUCK OFF" to the religious police as well as explain her own personal view of Sikhism.

In this dissertation I have demonstrated how the persistence of religious images of Sikh women with turbans is on the cusp of becoming *the new ideal* image of a Sikh woman. In light of these women wearing turbans and creating a new image, one symbol will not be enough. As in the case of young Sikh women wearing turbans on their own or wearing chunnies over their turbans, one symbol for women will not suffice. When women such as Taranjeet, the mother from the *Toronto Star* Sukhpreet Kaur, or the children walking the streets in honour of "Khalsa Day", wear not only a turban but also drape a chunni over the turban, the question, raised by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh as to

why women have to hide their hair beneath the turban and now a chunni, it is difficult to read our way out of identification with religious symbols and status (188). I have argued that wearing religious symbols such as the turban is a complex, dynamic and new religious practice for Sikh women, the local community and the global diaspora because they are invested with different and contradictory meanings for both genders.

As way of concluding, I would like to share an experience I had at a conference in October of 2011. The newly organized SAFAR, the Sikh Feminist Research institute, had organized a one day symposium entitled “Our Journeys Connecting: Our Stories, Vision and Paths,” which was held at the Centre of Women’s Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. It was presented as the first Sikh feminist research conference. I was a bit perplexed about the origin of the conference and what it meant for me, a woman, who identifies as Sikh, to have the words *Sikh* and *feminist* joined together. An example of these terms converged right in front of me during lunch time. An organization called the Kaurs United served the *langar* and asked that we “sit on the floor (a form of showing equality), shoes removed and our heads covered for respect” (Conference booklet 3).<sup>30</sup> The women who served the food were members of the Kaurs United, some of whom wore turbans, covered their hair with a chunni or wore a chunni over their turbans. The Kaurs United runs programs, camps, music camps and so on for Sikh women and preaches their version or vision of Sikhism. It was odd to be watching the langar hall of my childhood and community be transported to a somewhat secular university and see people participating as if it was part of a “Sikh feminist movement.”

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<sup>30</sup> At this conference, I presented a segment of chapter 1 entitled “Kuldip Gill’s Poetry as a Collective and Historical Memory Site.”

But no one seemed to question what that meant, that is, what it meant to be a Sikh feminist. Did it mean that I had to wear a turban, grow out my body hair and wear all the Five Ks? Earlier on, I shared the story of serving food at the Gurdwara and being told to “go make rotis,” which left me in a precarious position, so I was surprised to find myself once again feeling in the same precarious position while having lunch at the conference. What felt precarious was my identity as a Sikh and as a woman because I was not wearing a turban. The persistent image of Sikh women with turbans is on the cusp of becoming *the new ideal image* of Sikh women and that image takes after our *amritdhari* brothers and fathers. Can we as Sikh women not have an independent image of ourselves that is true to who we are without having to conform to religious symbolisms? In this dissertation, I have shown that it is possible. My examination of literary and cultural productions demonstrates how diverse and powerful narratives are making visible, audible and tangible the lives of Sikh women.

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